



Pastor Kyle Mercer  
We Are at War

July 14, 2024  
Series: Grace & Grit  
2 Corinthians 10

**BIG IDEA – WE ARE IN A WAR, AND EVERYONE NEEDS TO KNOW  
HOW TO FIGHT**

We are building a launch team in Lexington, for Lexington. I told you two weeks ago we were going to have an interest meeting after the 11:00 service, and many of you came. I told you about that via video last week. We had a gathering last night in Lexington, and here's what I'm so encouraged by. I'll show you a picture or two. I'm so encouraged not just by the quantity of people but by the quality of people who love our church and love their city.

Guys, we are headed to Lexington. If you want to find out more, I just recorded a podcast with Matt Jernigan, one of our key leaders. We're going to release that later this month. If you listen to that podcast, you'll know everything you want to know about the Lexington gathering as well as the city of Lexington as well as the best barbecue place in Lexington. It's all in that one podcast. I hope you guys can listen in.

If you're still interested in being a part of this Lexington launch team, I want you to text "Lexington" to 39808. We'll get you all the information you need. We're going to be launching that gathering September 15. It's going to be very special. More information to come.

For the rest of you, or if you're considering coming on our Lexington launch team, you have to come to our Weekender. The Weekender is the way we get Two Cities into you before you get into Two Cities, if that makes sense. It's the way we protect and promote our culture. Guys, if I haven't been clear enough, this summer is about preparing for the fall.

If you think about it, next door to us, as you drove in, you saw us preparing the property. That's going to be a brand-new, beautiful...just close your eyes and think about this with me...220 spots next door. We're really excited about that. Yeah! Now, in some ways it's easier to prepare the property than to prepare the people.

If you're new, here's how we want to help prepare you. We want you to get into our church and join us on this mission through the Weekender. We have one this next weekend. Like I always do, I'm going to start by praying for us, but particularly, obviously, I want to pray for our nation in light of everything that happened last night.

I was actually at this Lexington launch meeting. I always have my phone on silent and "do not disturb," just like you do, but it was still buzzing through, like, a ton. I'm thinking, "What is going on here?" I get done talking to this team, and I walk over to grab a water, and Pastor Caleb shows me the news website. "President Trump has been shot."

I know we're all trying to still put together the whole story, but we just want to pray for our nation, because the Bible says in 1 Timothy 2 we're supposed to pray for our nation. We thank God that President Trump is alive and well, and we just want to pray. We said from day one that what a divided nation needs is a unified church. We just want to take a moment and pray for our nation. So, if you'll close your eyes and bow your heads, let's pray.

Lord, we come to you in Jesus' name and, as the Bible says, we pray for our leaders. We pray for Trump and we pray for Biden. We pray against hatred, division, and political violence, and we pray for wisdom for our leaders, the different organizations of our government, the different heads of our government. Lord, we pray that this would be a time that would not lead to more division but maybe unity, goodwill, peace, and prosperity toward one another. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

I'm going to start today by quoting the great theologian Mike Tyson. Mike Tyson famously said, "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face." Isn't that true? You have a plan for your marriage, and you have a plan for your life. You have dreams and goals and strategies, and then you get proverbially punched in the face by life or by somebody.

What Paul is going to do today in 2 Corinthians, chapter 10, is he's going to respond to getting punched in the face by a bunch of critics. See, here's what I want you to know. And you know this already, but let me just say it out loud. This is something Jesus taught and Paul teaches and the whole Bible teaches. It's that the message of the gospel will be attacked. You knew that.

It's an offensive message. It tells people they need to repent. It tells them they're not okay as they are. It tells them they can't get to heaven by themselves, but it also tells them the good news of what Jesus has done for them. So, we know the message is going to get attacked, but we need to remember the second part. This is super important, guys. Don't be surprised by this. The New Testament is written so you won't be surprised by this.

Here's the second part. The *message* of the gospel will be attacked and the *messengers* of the gospel will be attacked. Really, what Paul is going to do for the next four chapters (and we'll spend a week in each over the next four weeks) is Paul is going to continue to respond to critics.

Now, what should you do when you get critics? Well, the late, great Billy Graham said to turn your critics into coaches. I know this will be surprising to some of you, but I've had a few critics in my day. What you want to do is to listen and learn everything you can from your critics.

You're going to see in a moment Paul is going to quote his critics. He knows what they're saying, but he also needs to refute the lies they are saying about him. He actually needs to stand up for himself. Some of *you* need to stand up for yourselves. We'll get there today.

There's one way for you to avoid criticism: do nothing and say nothing. Just keep your head down. Don't be explicitly Christian. Don't talk to anybody about Jesus. Criticism is the cost for having convictions. That's what happens.

## 00 PAUL MOVES FROM WE TO ME

So, criticism can be emotional and highly relational and all that. Follow along with me. Paul is going to show you how to deal with critics. Look at chapter 10, verse 1. "***I, Paul, myself...***" That's a lot of talking about you, Paul. "***I, Paul, myself...***" We get it. He says, "***I, Paul, myself entreat you...***" That means beg you. Paul wasn't below begging. "***...by the meekness and gentleness of Christ...***"

Basically, here's what happens, for those of you who are interested in this. This is the third and final section of the letter. Chapters 10-13 are one big argument. So Paul reintroduces himself. This is the only time in the letter, and one of the only times in *any* of Paul's letters, where he introduces himself disconnected from anybody else.

Normally, like he did at the beginning of this letter, he goes, "I'm with Timothy" or "I'm with Titus" or "I'm with Sosthenes" or "I'm with Barnabas" or "All of the elders and deacons are with me," but Paul goes, "No, no, no. I'm not going to drag them

along when it comes to criticism and what you might be saying about them. I'm going to respond personally."

Look at how he responds. He says, "***I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ...***" See, here's what happens in the church. We talk a lot in church today about living for Jesus. How about trying to live *like* Jesus? I'm so grateful that you're living for Jesus, whatever that means. I want you to live *like* Jesus. Paul says, "I want to act like Jesus..." That's hard enough, but then this: "...and I want to react like Jesus would."

You're thinking, "I want to act like Jesus," but then something happens that you weren't expecting. "Okay. I want to react and respond like Jesus would." It's hard to know what he would do. You have to read the Bible, because sometimes Jesus comforts the afflicted, and other times he afflicts the comfortable. He's tender with the sinner who wants to repent but very tough on the religiously lost who don't want to repent.

Paul says, "I do two things." He says, "First of all, I respond in meekness." I've told you this before, but meekness is not weakness. We'll get there in a few weeks. There's nothing good about being weak. God can use your weaknesses, and that's chapter 12 (we'll get there), but you're not supposed to be a doormat for Jesus. You're not supposed to be passive.

*Meekness* means strength with self-control. Then there's *gentleness*. That's a fruit of the Spirit. Gentleness is not "nice." I've read the whole Bible. The word *nice* is not in it. I mean, I know what you mean by that. Some people call each other *nice*, and if someone called you *nice*, you might think of it as a compliment. *Nice* normally means you smile and have no spine. Nice guys finish last.

Gentleness is something very different. The Bible says, "Let your gentleness be known to all mankind." *Gentleness* basically means I always use the minimal necessary force to get something done. If I can push the screw in with my thumb, I don't use a hammer, and if the hammer works, I don't break out the sledgehammer. I use minimal necessary force.

Paul says, "I'm not going to get overly emotionally involved in all this. I'm going to respond to criticism in the spirit and attitude of Christ, which is one of meekness and gentleness." Look at what he says next. He knows what they're saying about him. Look at what he says in the rest of verse 1. "***...I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away!***"

He's quoting what people are saying about him. Here's what they're saying: "Paul has a different personality online than in person." Have you ever met that person? Some

of you *are* that person. I've seen it. Have you ever met Aunt Karen? She is so loud on Facebook, and you're like, "This is crazy, the things she's putting up here, and she's yelling and commenting." Then you meet her, and she's a sweet, normal lady.

This is very common. They have a different persona and personality when they're away and online than when they're in person. Paul says, "Guys, I'm the same." You'll see this in a little bit. He's basically going to say, "What I am by letter I'll be when I get there in person."

But here's what Paul says. This is an important lesson for some of you. Look at verse 2. "***I beg of you...***" That's the same thing as "I entreat you." "***...that when I am present I may not have to show boldness...***" He says, "I'm gentle and meek. I don't want to have to get bold." "***...with such confidence as I count on showing against some who suspect us of walking according to the flesh.***"

Theologians break up the Christian virtues. There are a lot of ways to break up the Christian virtues. You can break up the Christian virtues into the *strong* Christian virtues and the *soft* Christian virtues. It's pretty self-explanatory. You can just start thinking of different virtues.

Paul basically says boldness is a strong virtue. Gentleness and meekness are soft virtues. "I would prefer..." And this is what a mature Christian would do in their home or with their friends. "I prefer to live by the soft virtues, but if I have to, I will be direct, I will be confrontational, and I will be bold, because that's exactly what Jesus did."

## **01 HOW: PAUL'S WEAPONS OF WARFARE**

All this fits in a larger theme. Criticism is part of something much bigger that we have to talk about, and it's going to be the rest of our message today. These are not my thoughts. I want this to arise out of Scripture. I want you to see something about criticism and where it fits in Paul's mindset. It's in verse 3.

***"For though we walk in the flesh..."*** That just means in our bodies. "[Though we live in the body], ***we are not waging war according to the flesh.***" When he says *flesh* the second time, he means like the world does. Here's what Paul wants you to understand. This criticism and all of these attacks are part of a larger spiritual war.

So, here's what we're talking about the rest of our time. Criticism is part of this. I can't overstate this from Scripture. We are part of a massive spiritual war. It's not a small topic in Scripture. The apostle Paul writes to Timothy to suffer like a good soldier. The apostle Paul, in Romans 7, describes our entire fight with sin as *warfare*.

A lot of people, when they think about what it means to be a Christian, think something like, "I'm a son or daughter of God." That's beautiful. That really is. "God is my Father. I'm his son." That's amazing. That's where some people go. Other people go, "Sheep. I'm a sheep. I've read Psalm 23. It's my favorite psalm. The Lord is my shepherd, and I'm a sheep. I love it that he leaves the 99 for the one. Aren't we all just sheep?" That's also true.

The Bible also says we're soldiers and God is our commanding officer. Again, I'm stereotyping, but the language of war and soldiers tends to be a little bit more difficult for women to hear than for men to hear. Well, ladies, all of the men in here have to put up with being called the *bride of Christ*. There are different illustrations that push on all of us.

I think, in general, men (and maybe women as well) are fascinated by war. I'm constantly asking my wife, "At what age can I introduce my kids to all of these war movies?" I'm so ready. I'm like, "William is 10. Is he ready for *Band of Brothers*?" (I haven't shown it to him yet.) Even on July 4, I was feeling all patriotic, and I was like, "I want to watch Mel Gibson in *The Patriot*. Yeah! I just want to see someone fight for our country."

Here's the whole thing, guys. You can't fight a war you won't admit you're in. We have to realize there's so much happening in our lives and it's warfare. G.K. Chesterton, the famous Catholic, famously wrote, "Marriage is an adventure...like going to war." You're like, "Yeah." You know this, guys. Parenting is a spiritual battleground.

I'm not trying to use extreme language, but we are in a spiritual battle for the hearts and minds and souls of people. So, I want us to talk about how to fight this battle. I'll show you. Paul is going to go on in verse 4. Follow me. **"For the weapons of our warfare..."** So, he's talking about war, and now he's talking about weapons. **"...are not of the flesh..."**

I want you to see this from Scripture. There are two types of weapons Paul is going to talk about. First are the weapons of the flesh, or you can think the weapons of the world. He says, **"For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but [our weapons] have divine power to destroy strongholds."** Here's what he's saying. A lot of times, when war happens (and some of you have fought for our country), things get crazy, and sometimes the worst parts of you come out. Sometimes you do things you regret. It's called the *fog of war*.

What he's saying is when you're in this battle, in this warfare, the temptation is going to be to use the wrong weapons. He says the weapons other people use when they're fighting with each other...manipulation, intimidation, reputation destruction, cancel

culture... He's like, "Guys, that's not how we fight this war. We are in a spiritual battle."

So, what are the weapons we use? I can't go here right now because we don't have enough time, but if you're interested, with your Community Group, Ephesians 6 tells you the weapons we're supposed to use, and they're spiritual weapons. It's the armor of God passage in your Bible, if you're familiar with it. Pastor Caleb actually preached a whole sermon on it about a year ago. You can find it on our website.

At the end of the day, here's what he's saying. If we're going to genuinely fight this battle for the minds and hearts of our kids in the next generation, it's not going to happen through marketing. We can't be thinking we're going to use the tools of the world to fight this battle. We're grateful for technology and all that. We're going to need to use things like the Word, prayer, and the power of the gospel.

Here's why, and this is what I want to focus on: because of what we're against. Look. I already read it to you. I want you to see this. We have to talk about this for a while. ***"For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh..."*** Those don't work. ***"...but have divine power to destroy strongholds."*** We need to talk about strongholds.

What is a stronghold? In context, let me tell you what a stronghold was back in that day, and you'll see how we have them today. Here's what a stronghold was. Every city had a wall to defend itself because people would come and attack. If the wall began to be destroyed, all of the people defending the wall went over to what was called the *stronghold*.

It was like a fortress or a fortified place from which you fought the end of the battle, and (this is important) it was the hardest place to take down. They put all their ammunition and everything they had... All of their weapons and all of their best men are there, and they're going to fight to the death at this stronghold.

Paul says we have all of these strongholds today. They're places where Satan camps out and it feels hopeless against this battle. Let me explain this. Strongholds are places, and they're also ideas. So, what's a stronghold today in our culture? These can be used for good or bad, but let me give you one of them: the university system. Go read the next verse. Paul says the strongholds are arguments against the knowledge of God.

I remember being a brand-new Christian and showing up at Elon University back in 2003. I'm a brand-new Christian. I'm like, "This is awesome. I'm a new Christian. I'm going to take New Testament 1." That was a mistake. It was completely godless. The professor was not a believer, and he tried to deconstruct everybody's faith in the class the whole time. That's not uncommon.

This is a word for all of us, but especially parents. I want to tell you what I think is the biggest stronghold today: the Internet. I know what you guys are thinking. "Hold on. You guys have a website." We do have a website. We're not against the Internet. We're not telling you to become Amish. That's not what we're doing today.

But I want to talk to you about this for a second, because I'm reading a book right now that I really think you should read if you can or listen to the Audible version. It's called *The Anxious Generation*, and it's written by Jonathan Haidt. He's a classic liberal. He's not a believer. He writes this book, and he's trying to figure out what's going on in the minds and hearts of, basically, the Millennial generation and younger.

You have to get this book. It is so intellectually stimulating I just can't handle it. I love it. It has so much data. Anyway, he asks when the Internet became bad for kids. Like, when do we see the hockey stick of depression and anxiety on girls and all that? In 2010. That's weird, because the Internet, we all know, was out a long time before 2010. It's the Internet plus social media, but hold on. Social media came out in 2004 with Facebook.

So, why is 2010 when everybody gets anxious and depressed? In 2010 they added the retweet button, they added the "like" button, and they added the ability to comment. We see the hockey-stick spike of anxiety and depression because a whole generation grew up anxious and depressed, comparing themselves to everybody else.

He says, basically, the same thing is happening on the other side with men, young boys especially, in video games and pornography. They're not as negatively affected by social media as women are. Here's my whole point: I don't know that we're aware enough of how much of a stronghold the Internet is.

He basically says it's the Internet plus the iPhone, because now the Internet travels with your son or daughter everywhere they go all the time they're there. Here's his big point. I think he's exactly right, and it fits perfectly for what we're talking about. He said American parents overprotect their kids in the physical world and underprotect their kids in the online world. I just want us to be aware, guys, this is a stronghold.

You need to be aware of this, parents, because if you're not, you're going to introduce a bunch of struggles into your kid's life for the rest of their life because you're afraid of them or their friends. No more of that. Here's what it means to be a parent: I make difficult decisions now so my kids don't have to make difficult decisions later. That's the definition of parenting.



## 02 WHERE: THE BATTLEFIELD OF THE MIND

So, strongholds are places. Strongholds are also ideas. I get that from the next verse. ***"We destroy arguments..."*** They're smart, and they have blogs, podcasts, and YouTube channels, and they write books. ***"...and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ..."***

When it comes to truth, there are two opposites of truth. There are *lies*. The thing about lies is sometimes they have some truth in them or have one part right. Lies are like a deviation from the truth. There's truth and there are lies. Then there is *anti-truth*. Anti-truth is something that is so far from the truth it's actually the exact opposite of the truth.

Here's what has happened. People have ideas, philosophies, and worldviews. Someone famously said people think they have ideas, but ideas have people. I've seen people (so have you if you think about it) be possessed by ideas. Paul says there are these certain ideas that implant themselves. It might be when they're 13. It might be when they're 18. Who knows?

People get these ideas that are wrong and these false arguments. They're strongholds in their life, and they hinder them from coming to Christ and believing other things. Think about a few examples with me. Let me give you a simple one. People are raised today to believe relativism.

Imagine I go to some progressive city or some progressive university campus or some progressive workplace. The classic person there, if I shared the gospel with them, would say something like, "I'm so glad you found something that works for you." It's the Coexist bumper sticker. Relativism says, "All ideas, perspectives, ideologies, religions, lifestyles, and belief systems are equally valid."

That belief system makes it impossible for someone to come and hear about ultimate truth. What if (and this is what everybody believes unless you're actively not believing this and fighting against this) what you're taught from a young age is that your job in life is to experience expressive individualism?

*Expressive individualism* is "Find out who you are on the inside. Go take your Myers-Briggs. Go take your Enneagram. Go take your DiSC test. Go think about your sexual orientation. Then I want you to spend the rest of your life telling everybody else about it. I want you to dress so I know what you're like on the inside. Buy that house in that neighborhood so I know exactly what you're like. Drive the car. Plan your whole wedding to express yourself."

So then my whole life is not about knowing God and telling others about *him* but diving deeper into myself and telling everybody else about *me*. What about if we tell everybody the greatest thing they could do with their entire life is to be sexually free? And what if we told everybody (which is exactly what we *are* telling everybody) that the most important thing about them is their sexual identity and it could change at any moment? "Good luck."

"It's fluid, and it's the most important thing about you. Build everything in your life around that. The greatest goal of your entire life would be to do whatever you want with whomever you want whenever you want." It's like, "Uh..." It's the exact opposite of what the Bible is teaching.

By the way... Every once in a while, people ask me questions, like, "Kyle, I love that you talk about Jesus and the Bible and heaven and hell and sin and all of those things, but why do you have to talk about transgenderism?" Well, we have to. Part of the job of a Christian and the role of a spiritual leader is to publicly destroy the arguments that are out there that are capturing people.

I'm not trying to be triumphant, but by God's grace, we are going to be a haven for truth. We are going to be a place where people's minds can get put back together and reshaped. We're going to do it together. We have to both teach what the Bible says but break down the false teachings of the culture. You get that.

But there's something important for *you* to do. We're all doing that together, but there's something *you* need to do. I read it, but let's read it again. Verse 5: "***We destroy arguments...***" We do that together. Great. "***...and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ...***"

Two weeks ago, I took my kids to see *Inside Out 2*. I have a lot of problems with Disney as well. I heard it was a good movie. I hate giving Disney my money, but you get it. So I went to *Inside Out 2*. The whole movie is basically about emotions. The first one was great about how these emotions work. It was interesting. The second one is about a girl who's going through puberty. She's going from young girl to young lady.

The whole movie is about her emotions, and as soon as she goes through puberty, all of these new emotions show up. Anxiety comes in. She's like, "Hey, I'm here." It's really clever. Here's the whole point. I'm not going to ruin the movie for you, but this is important. The emotions are trying to figure out how everything works, and the emotions are trying to change her behavior.

There's this moment in the movie where they realize the beliefs are under the emotions, and they have to go figure out the belief thing to figure out the emotion

thing to figure out the action thing. I'm like, "Okay, Disney. That's pretty thoughtful." We have to talk for a while about this idea of taking thoughts captive.

Paul is now continuing to use warfare language, but he's saying the battlefield is your mind. He's saying we need to take thoughts captive because our life is always moving in the direction of our strongest thoughts. *Always*. We live in a time where there is a massive (I don't fully understand it) mental health crisis like never before.

Obviously, I'm not a psychiatrist or a psychologist, but I want to free us from Scripture. I want to teach you how to take your thoughts captive. Here's the amazing thing: you can do this today. I'm going to give you the four steps. How do you take your thoughts captive?

First, you need to take full responsibility for your thoughts. Unfortunately, the path forward is the path of responsibility. Sorry. That's just what it is. So, you go, "Okay. I am responsible for my thoughts." Here's what that means: you're not passive. Now, let me clarify this. You can't control every thought you have, but you can control what you do with every thought you have.

Martin Luther, that famous monk turned Reformer, said you can't help it if a bird lands on your head, but you don't have to let a bird make a nest in your hair. That's exactly how thought life works. Here's the hard thing about thoughts. Thoughts are hard because you've been thinking them for a long time, and a lot of them are repeated, or you looked at something you shouldn't have looked at, and now you have thoughts about that.

I've said for years... What is the punishment for looking at pornography? Looking at pornography. The punishment is built into the sin. Some of you have listened to things and looked at things and done experiences and have been in some situations where people have said some things to you, so you have all of these thoughts. So, the first thing you have to do... Hear me. I love you. You have to take full responsibility. God would not tell you to take every thought captive if you couldn't do it. You need to know that. Too many of us think we're helpless. You're not helpless.

Secondly, you have to figure out the lies you're believing. Usually, you can't do this... Sanity is a community project. You can't do this by yourself. I mean, journaling will help you, but you need... We believe in privacy, not secrecy. You need a friend or two where you can be like... You just need to identify "What are the persistent lies I'm believing?"

I had a guy do this to me one time. He said, "Kyle, I've got to be honest with you. I just want to say it out loud. I believe if I had more I'd be happy." He already made a lot of money. He was like, "My whole life I've believed the lie that if I had more than I do

right now I'd be happier than I am right now." That's the materialism lie. "The more I have in my hands the happier I'll be in my heart."

Some of you may have to go... It's hard to say these out loud, and you'd only want to say it to a trusted friend. Some of you might want to say, "I feel like I'm believing the lie that if I was married to somebody else, my life would be different, and by different I mean better."

You have to say it out loud, and it's good to say it out loud. It loses its power when we say it out loud. Then you have to find the truth in Scripture. This is how you take it captive. You bring it out, and then you capture it with Scripture. You say, "What does Scripture say? Wait a second. God said I should be content because he'll never leave me or forsake me. Lord, let me feel that."

We have to take responsibility for our thoughts. We have to recognize the lies and replace them with Scripture. Okay. Here's the most subtle one. I can't tell if *you're* doing it, and you can't tell if *I'm* doing it. We have to change our mind, not just change our behavior.

Have you ever wondered...? I've been thinking about this for 20 years. How does burnout happen? That happens to people on staff in churches and stuff. It can happen with Christians. You're like, "All of a sudden, Jim is not in church anymore, they're getting divorced, and he's leaving the faith. What's going on?"

I don't think I've gotten to the full bottom of it, but I think burnout happens when you're behaving a way that you're not really believing in your heart. This happens in very moralistic churches. This happens in indie-fundie churches. This happens in high accountability churches where everybody is watching everybody all the time. People do behavior modification. *Religion* is to change my behavior; *repentance* is to change my mind.

You have to get to "change the mind," not just figure out how to play the Christian game in public. You have to be like, "Okay. I see money, possessions, and property differently. Whoa! That transforms my mind and heart; therefore, it transforms my giving, my generosity, and my stewardship of what God has given me." You need to have a total transformation of how you understand men and women and sexuality. Oh, and then that leads out into a life of purity.

Then the fourth is the most fun, so I've saved it for the last. You need to take responsibility for your thoughts; you need to get rid of those lies and replace them; you need to commit that you are going to change your mind, not just change your heart. Here's the fourth one and the fun one: start thinking some new thoughts.

Have you ever thought that there are some thoughts you never thought of? I know. It sounds like a Dr. Seuss rhyme. Right? Seriously, guys. This is so exciting. There are some thoughts you've never thought that you need to start thinking. I mean, wow! This is not just positive thinking.

Where do I get this from the Bible? I get this from the psalmist. The psalmist says to himself, "O soul, why are you so sad? Hope in God." In other words, stop listening to yourself and start talking to yourself. Start telling yourself true things about God and about Scripture and about life.

### **03 THE WAR IS ABOUT...IDENTITY & AUTHORITY**

Paul says that's the battlefield, but then, if you'll turn with me to verse 7, I need to show you something else. He tells us what's at stake. What are we fighting for? We're fighting with Word and prayer, and we're fighting in our minds. What are we fighting for? Identity. I'll show you this.

**"Look at what is before your eyes. If anyone is confident that he is Christ's..."** In other words, that he's in Christ, that he's connected to Christ. **"...let him remind himself that just as he is Christ's, so also are we."** I love it, because Paul doesn't say, "I'm more in Christ than they are." Why? Because you can't be more in Christ than someone else.

Here's what Paul is saying: "I am secure in my identity in Christ." The spiritual battle in your life is going to be for you to find your identity in something other than Christ. Paul says, "I'm confident because I'm in Christ." Listen. I want you guys... I'm not thinking of any one person, but I want every person in this church to be confident in who they are in Christ.

Some of you are so insecure. Please stop that. I can tell it by the way you carry yourself, by the way you shake my hand, by the lack of eye contact. I want you to be confident in who Christ has called you to be and what Christ has called you to do and what God in Christ has done for you. Okay? This is such an important concept.

You can either get your identity achieved or received. *Achieved* is "I will make my identity," and here's what happens: you'll become prideful or despair. You can't create your own identity and it go well and not become prideful, and you can't create your own identity and it go terribly and not become downcast.

Let me give you an example of this. The late, great Tim Keller tells a story about identity that I think is perfect. He said there was some girl (I think she was about 15

years old) who came in for counseling. He knew her parents. He didn't do a lot of counseling, but he knew the family, so he said, "I'll do some counseling with her."

She comes in and says, "Pastor Tim, I know Jesus loves me, and I know I'm going to heaven. I know my sins are forgiven. I know Christ died for me, but what does that matter if no boys like you?" He had compassion on her and walked her through it, but he said, "That's where most of us are. We say we have our identity in Christ, but really..." And I'm not trying to pick on whoever this 15-year-old girl is, because we all have our own issues with this. Really, her identity in that moment was not in Christ.

Paul says, "I have this rock-solid identity," but here's the other thing that's attacked. Spiritual warfare always attacks our identity, and secondly, it always attacks God-given spiritual authority. I'll show you. It's right in the text. Verse 8: **"For even if I boast a little too much of our authority..."** Here's Paul talking about authority. **"...which the Lord gave for building you up..."** What a great definition of *authority*: given from God to build up people. That's the purpose of authority.

**"...and not for destroying you..."** Earlier, Paul was talking about how he destroyed certain things...strongholds and false arguments. Paul has both a demolishing ministry and a building ministry. He does both at the same time. **"...which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I will not be ashamed."**

I kind of have talked about this. I'm going to try to talk about it in a little different way. Paul has to defend his authority because authority is... I know today in America we're suspicious of success, we're suspicious of authority, but authority brings order. God loves order. As soon as someone has authority, you know, "Oh, that person is responsible, and that person is accountable." It's beautiful. That's how authority works. There's responsibility and accountability with authority.

Okay. I'm going to try to explain this. Here's what Satan does. Part of Satan's spiritual strategy is to confuse the individual about their identity. That's where we are, as a culture, with all the sexual identity confusion, especially transgender and all that. The second thing he loves to do is usurp and reverse authority structures God has put in place.

Think about the average American home. You don't even want to go into it. The wife doesn't respect the husband. The husband is not leading his family. The children, in a strange way, even though they're 12, are in charge. It's a total mess. God is not honored by it, and that home has so much chaos. You want to leave as soon as you get in there.

How many churches...? I don't mean to get weird about this, but the role of pastors and elders is to have authority. Not domineering. Not tyrannical. But how many

churches in America...? You maybe wouldn't know this. I'm in these worlds. I mean, the pastor can't do anything. He's not in charge. The whole church withers, and it's terrible.

How does a nation fall apart? There's a lack of respect between the citizens and the government or the government becomes tyrannical. I don't have time to get into all of it. There are a lot of different ways authority can go bad, but here's what Paul says. The purpose of authority is for the right people to take responsibility and accountability and for us to build everybody up.

Paul says, "That's what I'm trying to do here." In fact, Paul will say the difference between a servant and a critic is a servant comes and sees what's wrong to build, and a critic comes and sees what's wrong to break down.

#### **04 THE BATTLE IS NOT AGAINST ONE ANOTHER**

Let me show you another thing really quickly. I want you to see verse 9. Paul says this, because they're attacking his authority. ***"I do not want to appear to be frightening you with my letters. For they say..."*** He's quoting his critics again. ***"His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account."***

In other words, they're saying, "Paul is not an impressive-looking guy." This is Greece. I mean, this is where men were in epic shape and were incredible orators. They would look at the external appearance, and based on how the guy looked and how he or she spoke, they would think, "This person is incredible."

Have you ever had the thought, "What did the apostle Paul look like?" We don't have an actual written-down description of him in the Bible, but the most validated, respectable thing we have of what the apostle Paul looked like is from the second century. I want to read it to you. This is a description of the apostle Paul.

"A man small of stature, with a bald head and crooked legs, in a good state of body..." He'd been through a lot, but he was tough. I love this. "...with eyebrows meeting..." The apostle Paul had a unibrow. It's right there. "...and nose somewhat hooked..." But then ending with his character. "...full of friendliness; for now he appeared like a man, and now he had the face of an angel."

Here's what Paul is saying. Paul knows it. He goes, "I know I'm not that impressive." Then they said (which probably hurt his feelings a little bit), "You're not a very good speaker." It's hard, because all we have is Paul's letters, but what's interesting is certain places you look at and go, "It looks like Paul is a good speaker," because he's

with Barnabas, and at first it's Barnabas and Paul, and it changes to Paul and Barnabas.

Paul is always the one who preaches when the two of *them* are together, so we at least know he's a better preacher than Barnabas. But in Acts, chapter 20, he's preaching to the Ephesian elders, and it says a young guy falls asleep and falls out of the window. I'm glad I'm not the only person someone has fallen asleep on when I'm preaching. Paul says, "I know I'm not impressive." Verse 11: ***"Let such a person understand that what we say by letter when absent, we do when present."***

Paul has a couple of different things. First, he's basically saying (and this is a big value of our church)... Paul goes, "Guys, substance over style. You're so worried about style; I'm about substance. You're worried about technique; I'm worried about truth. You're worried about the external; I'm concerned with the internal." Translation: "Corinthians, you have a bad and wrong value system. You're valuing the wrong things."

So, Paul says one more time, "Who I am when I am away is who I'm going to be when I get there." By the way, this is another key thing. Paul basically speaks to his consistency. One of the greatest things you could give your kids, your wife, and your friends is being consistent. How many of you, it's like we don't know which version of you we're going to get, and it wears us out. Are we getting happy Mom or sad Mom today? Are we getting fun Dad or grumpy Dad?

You need to be, by the grace of God, consistent. When you're consistent, this is what it does to people: it puts them at ease. Very important. That's what you want to do. You want to put everyone at ease. They know how you're going to act in a situation. They're not surprised. They're not like, "Which version of you are we going to get?"

My favorite definition of *character* is not who you are when no one else is around. That's kind of a scary definition. That's kind of trying to get at you. My favorite definition of how you build character is you choose consistency over compromise. That's all you do. Here's what a leader does. A leader does consistently what everyone else does occasionally.

Paul says, "Guys, I'm unbelievably consistent." By the way, I know I'm talking a lot to parents today. Parents, be consistent in your standards. Be consistent in your discipline. Be consistent in your praise. Consistency is so key. Paul goes, "Guys, I know I don't look great. I know I'm not the best speaker, but with me, what you see is what you get. I'm always the same."



## 05 WE EACH MUST FIGHT OUR OWN BATTLE

Then he says, ***"Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves."*** Paul basically says, "Guys, don't put me in the comparison game. I'm not playing that game, because it also leads to pride or despair. I'm not playing that game."

***"But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding. 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. 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."***

Let me try to explain this. Paul basically says, "Guys, I came to you, and I reached you with the gospel. I built something new among a people where there was nothing." He said, "That's part of the legitimacy of my ministry." He said, "Here's what critics do," and this is exactly what critics do. Watch this online.

Critics find somebody else who built something, and then they try to go and discredit the person who built it so they can take it over. This is very, very common. This is actually a status thing. People who have lower status than a higher-status person will try to pick on the higher-status person to lower their status and elevate *their* status. That's exactly what's happening here.

Paul built this incredible church, and the critics come in and go, "Actually, guys, you need to give to us instead. Paul was wrong about a couple of different things." Paul is like, "Guys, these guys have never built anything. They just go and take what other people have already built." That's what he's saying. Then Paul ends with this. I love his heart. Verse 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, so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in another's area of influence. 'Let the one 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."***

I love Paul. Paul goes, "Guys, here's my heart. I want to reach new people, and I want to go to new places. I'm not interested in coming in and taking over anybody else's work. I want to start my own thing."

If we take the battlefield/war mentality, Paul goes, "Guys, if we're going to go to the front lines, if we're going to reach people nobody else is reaching, if we're going to go to places nobody else has ever gone, you are going to be the tip of the spear, and there are going to be the greatest and hottest battles when you are on the front lines reaching new people in new places."

We talked a lot about war today. A couple of years ago, during COVID, I was with a pastor, and we were talking. His church was growing a lot during COVID, and I wanted to learn from him, so I met with him. He's a mentor. I said, "Tell me what's going on during COVID and how you're doing all you're doing." He goes, "Well, as soon as COVID happened, I realized we were in a spiritual war."

He said, "So I've been studying war strategy for the last few months." I was like, "This guy is a man. He's studying war strategy." He goes, "Oh, yeah. And I figured out that in war you only have three options." He said, "Option one is you retreat. You say, 'I can't win this battle. Hurry up before we lose more,' and you leave." He said, "You can't do that as a Christian. We're victorious in Christ. We can't retreat."

He said, "The second temptation is to hunker down, to just go, 'Okay. Hold on. Let's count our losses. Let's stay right here. Let's hope they don't come. Let's hope it all blows over.'" He said, "Every time someone hunkers down, all they do is lose later." He said, "The only way forward is to advance."

I just want to end by praying over our church (I want you to pray with me) that we would have a pioneering spirit that says, "We are going to advance. We're going to plant more churches. We're going to reach more people. We're going to send more missionaries, and guess what that means. We have more strongholds to deal with and more thoughts to take captive, but we're going to do it together."

If you'll close your eyes and bow your heads, let's pray. I want to give you a moment. If you can think of a stronghold in your life or in your kid's life, I want you to pray against that stronghold, and I want you to think about an action you can take. For some of you, this is the most practical sermon you've ever heard, because you're going to go home and have a conversation with your kid about online, and you and your husband are going to get lined up over a couple of things. For the rest of us, we have thoughts we need to take captive.

Lord, would you make us active in our thought life? The Bible says the Christian has the mind of Christ. Because we have your Word, Lord, we know what you think about things. Would you help us to take responsibility for our thoughts? Would you help us to not believe lies but replace them? Lord, would you help us to change our mind, not just our behavior, and would you help us, for your glory and our good, to think new, better, godly thoughts? We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.