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Grace Under Pressure

2 Corinthians 10

Introduction

We are returning to our series on 2nd Corinthians, after a break for our Christmas series. Let us recap where we were.

Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians after he had written a severe letter dealing with sin in the church. Now he urges the church in Corinth to forgive the repentant saint and move on. We have dealt with themes of Suffering, Integrity, Forgiveness, Repentance, Reconciliation and Holiness. In chapters 8 and 9 Paul moved to discussing the subject of giving.

In the final section, chapters 10 to 13, Paul deals with a personal attack from within the church. It seems there are some there who question his authority and his calling as an apostle. In chapter 11 he even calls them super apostles. Over these four chapters he defends himself quite fiercely. However it's not for the sake of his own reputation: he is worried that the church is being led astray by another gospel, and he wants them to see, understand and hold on to the truth.

OK, let's turn to the start of this section, chapter 10.

Today we might call it being cancelled. In my younger days we might say we've been sent to Coventry, meaning no one would talk to us. Some religious groups have the practice of shunning. It generally happens when the group decides that an individual has said or done something that is very wrong. They judge them to be a bad person and cut them off from the goodwill of the group. It seems like this has been happening to Paul. Some in the church have been making accusations about him and questioning his authority, his ministry and his reputation.

It also appears some in the church are trying to replace Paul, using their charm and their eloquence to win over the congregation.

How is Paul going to deal with this attack?

We'll look at the chapter 6 verses at a time. Broadly these three sections deal with an attack on Paul's walk, his ministry and his reputation.

V1-6 - Attack on Paul's Walk - He is Carnal

1 I, Paul, myself entreat 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. 4 For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power 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.*

One of the main claims against Paul is that he's inconsistent. When he writes to the church he can be very bold. However when he visits in person he seems very mild. His critics take this as a sign of weakness, of not standing up to people when he is face to face. Paul doesn't deny that he is softer in person, saying he is humble when he meets them, but he points to Christ, and appeals to his meekness and gentleness. Meekness and gentleness aren't signs of weakness, but of self control. Look at the way Jesus dealt with many sinners who came to him with repentant hearts. But also remember how he dealt with the moneychangers at the temple. He was fierce when appropriate.

And Paul says he can be fierce too. In fact he implores the Corinthians not to get on his bad side, in a kind of "don't make me angry, you won't like me when I'm angry" imitation of the Hulk comic character. In verse 2 he indicates that there are some who will be receiving the bold side of this character: those who have been accusing him of walking according to the flesh.

Paul's defence of this is to first increase the temperature. It's not just about walking, it's about warring. And the weapons Paul is using in this war are not weapons of the flesh. He's firing back at his accusers here. They have been pulling the church towards their direction of teaching and they've been using fleshly weapons: force, coercion, confusion, charisma. And Paul is fighting back, but not using the same weapons. He is using divine weapons. What can they be?

What about truth? What about God's word? What about prayer?

These are the weapons Paul employs against these false teachers. When faced with simple, honest truths, the strongholds of belief that have been built on lies just crumble away. Arguments can be defeated by returning to the Word and seeing what it has to say. Lofty opinions can be defeated by humble prayer.

These days it seems all too easy to get into an argument with someone who strongly believes something that we can see is obviously false. We can learn from Paul by not using the same tactics they do but by speaking simple truths in love, directing them to the word of God, and praying for them.

V7-12 - Attack on Paul's Ministry - He is Weak

***7** Look at what is before your eyes. If anyone is confident that he is Christ's, let him remind himself that just as he is Christ's, so also are we. **8** For even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I will not be ashamed. **9** 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. **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.

Paul's enemies say Paul is unimpressive in appearance, and weak in his speech (v10). Perhaps you've felt that some times. Perhaps you have sat and watched a speaker make their way up to the front and thought "he doesn't seem much to look at: a bit scruffy, a bit overweight, looks like he cuts his own hair." Or maybe as the speaker starts their message you have thought "this isn't very engaging." Now being engaging and approachable can be useful. If you can capture the attention of the congregation you have more chance of getting the message across. But it's the message that is the important thing.

Firstly, Paul says to remember that you're being critical of a fellow believer. In verse 7 he says to observe the obvious: if they call themselves Christians, then surely the ones who brought the message of Christ to them are Christians also. It's not good for us to be putting one another down when we should be building each other up. Paul mentions that in verse 8.

Secondly, Paul argues that actions speak louder than words. His letters may be bold and his sermons may seem weak in comparison but his actions are a different matter. Paul's ministry was more than just words and he showed the love that he had for the Corinthians when he visited them, whether that was encouraging them or rebuking them. His actions were consistent with those bold letters.

Thirdly he called out the accusers for comparing themselves among each other and with him. He admits that he might come up short against them - "*Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those [v12]*" but says in comparing among themselves they lack understanding. What does he mean by this? Imagine seeing a flock of sheep on a green hillside. They're nice and white looking. Some of them might be a bit whiter than others. But change the setting and see them in the snow. Now none of them seem white. These men were comparing themselves to each other and thinking they were spiritual. But in the light of God's glory they would see that they all fall way short of the mark. It is only by God's grace that they could possibly be effective.

Each of us has a chance to be a minister to others, whether that's speaking to a group or just talking one to one. We must not compare ourselves to each other and remember it is only by grace that the gospel can be spread.

V13-18 - Attack on Paul's Reputation - He is a Glory-Stealer

13 *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 labours 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. 17* *"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.*

The final accusation Paul covers in that of taking credit for other people's work, or stealing their glory. In football one of the notorious characters is the poacher. He likes to hang around the opposition goalmouth and wait for a shot or pass to come near him. He will take a simple tap into the goal and claim all the credit. It is possible that some have accused Paul of taking credit for churches springing up in towns that were evangelised by others, but it's also likely that Paul is pointing out that these accusers are trying to take credit for the work that he started. He is saying that they are the goalmouth poachers.

In verse 13 Paul says that he won't boast beyond limits, but only with regard to the area of influence God has granted to him. Some have suggested that the language here reflects that used in the Greek world for athletes on a running track, each running within their own lane. Paul is saying that he stays in his own lane. Indeed there are several places in the New Testament where Paul and others decided to split up and evangelise in certain areas. Paul says that God put him in Corinth - "*For we were the first to come all the way to you with the gospel of Christ. [v14]*"

However he does hope that area will expand. As the Corinthians gain in faith and become more established as a church he hopes to use them as a stepping-off place to reach out to other towns and countries, not stepping on the toes of other evangelists of course.

He finishes off by having a dig at these "super apostles" and the way they are approving and commending themselves for ministry. Paul says it is God who commends, God who approves.

I wonder if we know our lane. Do we know the areas in which God wants us to minister? Each of us has a place and a purpose in God's plan, and it is in fulfilling this that we can know God's blessing.

Application

So Paul finds himself under pressure, under fire. We'll hear more about it in upcoming weeks, but how did Paul deal with it?

An old Christian friend and mentor once told me that when we receive criticism we should first of all evaluate it, weighing up the truth of it. If any of it is true we should deal with it, but what is false we should just discard.

Paul shows patience and grace towards the Corinthians here. He is concerned about those who are leading them astray: more than his own reputation, he's worried about their spiritual health. In dealing with their criticism he:

- Uses divine weapons rather than dirty tricks, speaking truths to defeat rumour and lies.
- Is consistent with his bold letters when living among them
- Sticks to the work God has sent him to do, not stealing others' thunder

If we live any amount of time as Christians we will come under criticism. Let's learn from Paul in dealing with it, showing grace and humility in our response.