**“For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. *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, and we are ready to punish all disobedience, whenever your obedience is complete.”**

**—*2 Corinthians 10:3–6 (NASB)***

It was over fifty years ago that the Anglican theologian Harry Blamires issued his dire assessment about the state of the Christian church:

The Christian mind has succumbed to the secular drift with a degree of weakness and nervelessness unmatched in Christian history. It is difficult to do justice in words to describe the complete loss of intellectual morale in the twentieth century church. One cannot characterize it without having to recourse to language which will sound hysterical and melodramatic. There is no longer a Christian mind. There is still, of course, a Christian ethic, a Christian practice, and a Christian spirituality. . . But as a thinking being, the modern Christian has succumbed to secularism. (*The Christian Mind*, 3)

If that assessment was accurate a half century ago, it would be difficult to find words to describe the situation today. The impact of secularism on the church is dramatically displayed in its growing capitulation to LGBTQ propaganda, in its inability to discern the evils of the BLM movement, and in its ambivalence toward the encroachment of the state in the affairs of the church. An example of such capitulation can be seen in a recent tweet by Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York, and one of the leading voices in The Gospel Coalition. His tweet came in response to a segment of *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* in which Colbert discussed his “faith” as a Roman Catholic. He summarized his version of “Christianity” with being “connected to the idea of love and sacrifice being somehow related and giving yourself to other people.” However, his only reference to Jesus was in a joke. Yet in response Keller tweeted, “This is a brilliant example of how to be a Christian in the public square. Notice the witness, but in a form the culture can handle. We should desire to have more Christians in these spaces and give them grace as they operate” (Feb 4, 2022).

Keller’s remarks show just how far some of evangelicalism’s leading celebrity voices have taken their cues from secular culture. Based on the actual testimony of Colbert’s nightly shows, he is no Christian. His comedy normalizes sin and ridicules righteousness. Yet Keller disagrees and uses his platform to advance Colbert’s testimony as a model for Christians to imitate.

What is the antidote? Or better, what prevents a Christian from succumbing to the spirit of the age? Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 10:3–6 provide the answer.

**The Context of 2 Corinthians 10:3–6**

The Apostle Paul had a two primary purposes in writing 2 Corinthians: (1) to express relief that the Corinthians had repented from their previous disobedience to his teaching; and (2) to confront those in the church who had come under the influence of false apostles. Second Corinthians 10:3–6 comes at the start of Paul’s treatment of this latter objective (chapters 10–13).

**Who were these “false apostles”?** Paul refers to them directly in 11:13, “For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.” More specifically, a survey of chapters 10–13 indicates that they were Jewish (e.g., 11:22), they claimed to be commissioned by Christ Himself (e.g., 11:23), they scoffed at Paul and his ministry (e.g., 10:11), and they openly promoted themselves (e.g., 10:12). Other details in these chapters indicate that they praised rhetorical eloquence, they had an affinity to the wisdom of this world, and they claimed to be recipients of special revelations.

Some of their arguments are summed up by Paul in the words leading up to 10:3–6. He writes, “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! 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” (10:1–2). As Paul intimates, these false apostles accused Paul of *inconsistency*—that he was fearless from afar but fragile in person. And they accused him of *worldliness*—that he used unspiritual, human means and methods in his ministry. As D. A. Carson notes, **“The clash between Paul and the intruders was a clash of world views. Paul’s world view was shaped by the gospel; theirs took its form from what was praised in the segments of society whose honor they cherished”** (*From Triumphalism to Maturity*, 39).

In response to the accusations of these false apostles, Paul writes 10:3–6 to explain his approach to proclaiming and defending the truth. Underscoring the magnitude of what was at stake, Paul draws heavily upon warfare imagery to explain the fundamental issues involved in the church’s faithful existence in the world. (NOTE: Paul frequently equated the Christian life with warfare—a fact that is ignored to the church’s detriment; see 1 Cor 9:7; 2 Cor 6:7; Eph 6:10–18; 1 Thess 5:8; 1 Tim 1:18; 2 Tim 2:3–4; etc. So long as the church remains on earth, she is the church *militant.*)

**I. Paul’s Defense of the Truth Summarized (2 Cor 10:3–4)**

The false apostles claimed Paul “walked *according to* the flesh” (v. 2, emphasis added)—i.e., that he operated according to natural abilities and devices. But as Paul begins to summarize his defense of the truth, he changes their own wording to make an important point. He did not walk *according to* the flesh; he walked *in* the flesh: **“For though we walk *in* the flesh . . .”** (v. 3a, emphasis added). By this subtle change Paul acknowledges his frail humanity. He was indeed a clay vessel, not worthy of the surpassing glory entrusted to him (see 2 Corinthians 4:7–10, 16). Paul begins where every faithful defense of the truth must begin: *humility.* He did not preach himself, but Christ.

Nevertheless, humility does not mean *passivity*: **“For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh” (v. 3).** Although Paul’s existence was indeed “earthen,” his proclamation and defense of the truth were not. To summarize his ministry efforts, he uses the term “war”(στρατεύω , *strateuō*), which means “to engage in conflict, wage battle, fight” (BDAG, 947). The debate between truth and error is no intermural sporting competition. It is so serious that it must be compared to *warfare*. However, the conflict waged in defense and support of the truth uses means and methods “not according to the flesh.” In other words, it does not employ weapons or strategies from the natural man’s arsenal.

Paul reiterates his assertion in the following verse: **“for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses” (v. 4).** The successful defense and advance of the truth require the right weaponry (the word “weapon” refers to“an instrument designed to make ready for military engagement,” BDAG, 716.1). This weaponry cannot be the means and methods of the natural man. Truth cannot be preserved and promoted by the arguments and approaches of the unbeliever (see 1 Cor 2:14; contra Tim Keller!). But when this weaponry is drawn from the right armory—God’s armory—it is effective and insurmountable. It is able to destroy “fortresses.”

The term Paul uses for “fortresses” refers to “a strong military installation” (BDAG, 746). The Corinthians would have quickly caught this analogy. The city of Corinth was located in the shadow of one of the most impressive acropolises in all of Greece—the Acrocorinth. At the top of this steep mountain lay the defenses for the city. If every under assault, the residents could quickly escape up the mountain to the protection of its walls. But as Paul states, there is no refuge for human sophistry, no safe haven for error when the divine arsenal is employed.

Which weaponry did Paul have in mind? He does not say here, although earlier in his letter he refers to it. It is “the knowledge of Christ” (2:14); it is “the word of God,” the “truth,” “the gospel,” “the knowledge of the glory of God” (4:1–6); it is “the word of truth, in the power of God; by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left” (6:7). These things, Paul says, are “divinely powerful.”

**II. Paul’s Defense of Truth Specified (2 Cor 10:5–6)**

“This constitutes an admonition to the Church and particularly to her leaders, for the temptation is ever present to meet the challenge of the world, which is under the sway of the evil one, with the carnal weapons of this world—with human wisdom and philosophy, with the attractions of secular entertainment, with the display of massive organization. Not only do such weapons fail to make an impression on the strongholds of Satan, but a secularized Church is a Church which—having adopted the standard of the world—has ceased to fight and is herself overshadowed by the powers of darkness. But this verse also constitutes a promise to the Church, for it is constantly true of those weapons with which the Holy Spirit has supplied her that they are *divinely powerful* for the destruction of these very strongholds. When engaging the enemy with these weapons the Church is assured of victory.” —Philip Hughes, *2 Corinthians*, 350–51

After summarizing his approach to promoting and defending the truth as a *battle waged not according to human methods and means*, Paul proceeds to specify how this is done. He outlines a three-stage process:

1. **Destroying Speculations (v. 5a).** *“We are* destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God.” Paul paints the picture of a military siege and conquest (“destroying” = “to destroy by tearing down,” BDAG, 488). But here this siege is not against an actual city. It is aimed at two non-material targets: (a) “speculations” (λογισμός*, logismos*), which refers to “the product of a cognitive process” (BDAG, 598)—i.e., a calculation, reasoning, plan, argument; and (b) “every lofty thing raised against the knowledge of God,” which describes any deliberation posited in opposition to God—i.e. arrogant, independent thinking.

The false apostles had erected a wall between the Corinthians and the truth, and it was Paul’s duty to demolish it. They had erected a tower to keep the truth from the Corinthians, and it was Paul’s duty to tear it down brick-by-brick.

1. **Taking Thoughts Captive (v. 5b).** *“*And *we are* taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.” The verb “to take captive” means “to cause someone to become a prisoner of war” (BDAG, 31); it contains the idea of forced submission to a conquering general. But here again this submission is not forced on people.

This submission is demanded from *ideas*. Paul identifies them as “thoughts” (νόημα*, noēma*)—“that which one has in mind as product of intellectual process” (BDAG, 657). This required submission does not just refer to religious ideas, for Paul explains that this submission extends to “every” thought. Every product of man’s intellectual process must be brought into conformity—"obedience”—to the standard of Jesus Christ.

“Hence, we must set out with this, that he who is wise must become a fool (1 Cor 3:18), that is, we must give up our own understanding, and renounce the wisdom of the flesh, and thus we must present our minds to Christ empty, that he may fill them.” —*John Calvin*

1. **Punishing Resistance (v. 6).** *“*And we are ready to punish all disobedience, whenever your obedience is complete.” To complete the analogy, Paul uses another word picture from warfare—that of ongoing readiness to seize upon any attempts at insubordination once the conquest has been won and the captives have been subjugated.

In the Corinthian context, Paul here refers to his “readiness” (a word referring to a military state of alertness) to bring discipline on any in the church who—after being given sufficient time to turn from the error of the false apostles—would continue to think, speak, and act contrary to the knowledge of God. Certainly, there is freedom in this world to believe and promote lies—but not from within the church.

**How must we respond?**

1. **Accept the fact that he most important battle** **in your life is the battle raging in your mind.** The most reliable indicator of the state of your soul is the state of your thinking. To add to that, Paul’s preferred analogy to describe this aspect of the Christian life is that of *warfare;* his terminology in 2 Cor 10:3–5 is especially striking. You must abandon the dangerous intellectual laziness that assumes that your mind exists in a demilitarized zone.
2. **Recognize that the center of gravity in each battle is the lordship of Christ.** As Abraham Kuyper famously stated, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!” If a thought or line of reasoning does not harmonize with the fact that Christ is Lord, it is error and must be rejected. This extends to all areas of life, and explains why issues like *pronouns* and our understanding of the *Christian faith* are not “matters of indifference” (*adiaphora*).

“It is not too strong to say that we are at war, and there are no neutral parties in the struggle. One either confesses that God is the final authority, or one confesses that Caesar is Lord.” —*Francis Schaeffer*

1. **Implement Paul’s three-stage method of warfare.** *Stage 1:* Attack any thought that sets itself up against God’s revealed word. *Stage 2:* In the place of a rebellious thought, foster a new thought that expresses the lordship of Christ over that area of life. *Stage 3:* Be vigilant for subtle movements toward rebellion.
2. **Pay attention to what you take in.** The Corinthian problem was a problem of giving intellectual attention to the so-called wisdom of the false apostles. But you must take the words of the psalmists to heart: “I will set no worthless thing before my eyes; I hate the work of those who fall away; it shall not fasten its grip on me” (Psalm 101:3); and “Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You” (Psalm 119:11). Do not expect to win battles in your mind if you know little of God but much about the world.
3. **Apply God’s Word to All of life.** To wage good warfare requires not only a good defense, but also a good offense. Cultivate a mindset that considers all aspects of life—work, family, recreation, pleasure, relationships, politics, finances—proactively, through the grid of Scripture. Always be asking, “Can I reconcile this pattern of thinking with the fact that Jesus is Lord?”

**For Further Study**

“True spirituality covers all of reality. There are things the Bible tells us as absolutes which are sinful—which do not conform to the character of God. But aside from these the Lordship of Christ covers all of life and all of life equally. It is not only that true spirituality covers all of life, but it covers all parts of the spectrum of life equally.

In this sense there is nothing concerning reality that is not spiritual.” —Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto*, 19

1. Memorize 2 Corinthians 10:3–6.
2. Reflect upon the thoughts that are occupying most of your time. Classify that thinking into distinct categories (e.g., career, family, retirement, schooling, dating, friendships, recreation, investments). Consider how the lordship of Christ as defined by God’s Word speaks into each of these areas of your thinking.
3. Consider an area of troublesome temptation in your life. Describe how Paul’s three-stage approach to error applies specifically to that area of weakness.
4. Develop a plan for how Paul’s approach to correcting errant thinking can be applied to a man who is struggling with lust.
5. Some seek to apply Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 10:3–6 to the mission of the church—that the church should employ Paul’s strategy outside the church by taking over the culture, government, etc., and bringing all these human institutions into submission to Christ. How would you respond to such an argument?

**Audio, video, and handouts for this session:** gracechurch.org/motw

**Next meeting:**February 16, 7pm, “For Conscience’ Sake”