

September 5, 2021

LABORING IN THE MIDST OF A REBELLIOUS PEOPLE

2 Corinthians 10:1-18

(20 of 22 in a series through 2 Corinthians)

The heavyweight boxer Mike Tyson famously said, “Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.” Though he was speaking specifically with regard to boxing, his larger point is fair, isn’t it? It’s easy for us to chart out how something is supposed to go that all sounds perfect, until you’re in the middle of it, you feel opposition, and then everything goes out the window. This may represent how some of us feel about living the Christian life. It may be the case that we have a glorious vision of what living the Christian life should look like in our minds, but when we actually go to interact in a world where Jesus isn’t prized, his commandments aren’t obeyed, and his followers not praised, we begin to struggle. Just this week I listened to a man recount how he’d been visiting with a believing professor in New York City, and he asked the professor how he survived in that environment being pro-life. And the man said that the professor lifted his hand up to his mouth and made a horizontal zipping motion, suggesting that he survived by saying nothing about it.

Now, when we hear a story like that, I trust we all know that this isn’t the approach for following Jesus in the midst of a world that is antagonistic to his commands. But what is it supposed to look like? How do we labor to obey our Lord in how we live our lives in the midst of a people who are in rebellion against him? Well, if we’ve found ourselves wondering that, then I think we’ll find some answers in the text we’re looking at this morning—2 Corinthians 10.

The reason this text is particularly helpful in thinking through how we follow Christ in the midst of a world in rebellion against him is because Paul writes this letter addressing how he thinks, speaks, and lives while addressing a people who are attacking him personally and (more importantly) are in rebellion against Christ. We’ve noted since the beginning of this letter that Paul writes this letter of 2 Corinthians with full awareness that there are some who oppose him and are telling the Corinthians not to listen to him. Paul sarcastically refers to them as “super-apostles” because they elevate themselves, and specifically they elevate themselves above him. It seems (based on the topics Paul addresses in the letter) that they’ve said to the Corinthians that they’re better than Paul because Paul suffers, isn’t an impressive speaker, doesn’t have a list of credentials, doesn’t charge high prices for his ministry, and on and on. And to this point, Paul has defended his practices by telling the Corinthians why he does what he does. That is, he’s defended his practices. But he hasn’t really gone on the offensive against those attacking him yet in this letter. That changes when you get to chapter 10.

Beginning in this chapter Paul goes right after his opponents, directly addressing their attacks, calling them out specifically, and ultimately identifying them as servants of Satan (11:13-15). And as he does this, he’s showing the Corinthians once more how they need to walk. You see, if they were being tempted to listen to these opponents of Paul because they possessed so many qualities that the world says we should value, then Paul is going to show the Corinthians how to

follow Christ in the midst of a world that doesn't value what our Lord does. And to this end it is instructive for us as well. How do obey Christ, then, in the midst of a world in rebellion against him and one that doesn't value what he tells us we should? Paul identifies a few things for us that I'll summarize in three statements. The first is that we do not engage the world on their terms.

We do not engage the world on their terms

The temptation to engage the world on their terms, prizing what they prize seems to have been a lingering temptation for the Corinthian believers. You may remember in 1 Corinthians how Paul wrote to them, reminding them that the cross is folly to the unbelieving world and that we ourselves appear foolish and weak in the world that is seeking to boast in their wisdom and strength. Paul wrote that obviously because the Corinthians felt the lure of wanting to be seen as wise and strong in this world. Therefore, Paul had to remind them that God's intent in the gospel is to destroy the wisdom of the wise (1 Cor 1:19) and shame the strong in this world (1:27).

But this lingering temptation in their heart hadn't gone away. And when Paul's opponents came along telling them to dismiss Paul because he didn't appear wise, strong, or noble, they were tempting these believers at the very place they were vulnerable. And Paul knew it. That's why he's written this letter and explained the way God works in suffering, why his speaking (though not that impressive) is of a glorious reality that God gives life to those dead in sins. It's why he's written the first seven chapters of this letter—to explain why the very elements his opponents attack about his ministry are actually quite intentional on Paul's part. And now he's going to show them that they can't get caught up in responding to the world on their terms. Let me explain what I mean.

Paul's attackers are charging him with being bold in his letters but cowardly when he's face to face with someone. Now, if Paul were going to be sucked into engaging his attackers on their own terms, he'd respond by saying something like, "Let me show them how courageous I am. I'll never be accused of being cowardly again." But instead, notice how he opens this section in addressing the Corinthians. He writes, "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!" In other words, he's not admitting to being this way but mockingly bringing up what they say about him. But more importantly, he's showing that he doesn't take his cues from looking at where the world is attacking him and proving them false. He is taking his cues from Christ's character and commands.

He doesn't simply say that he addresses them in meekness and gentleness—though that alone would be a bold declaration in light of his attacks. He says that he addresses them "by the meekness and gentleness of Christ." In other words, his eyes aren't on the world, keeping note of their accusations, so that he can make sure to respond and show himself impervious to their attacks. Rather, his eyes are on Christ, making sure that he is living in a way that models

Christian character in this world. This is the first note that Paul isn't going to engage the world on their terms. But there's more.

In verse 2 he writes, "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." In other words, Paul is going to address his attackers and make sure they understand that they have no place in the Corinthian church (unless they repent and believe, of course). But he doesn't want to have to be bold and confrontational with the Corinthians. Why? Again, the answer is the same. It is because though Christian character demands that we confront when necessary, causing pain, it prefers not to. I mentioned this when we looked at an earlier chapter where Paul says that he labored not to cause the Corinthians pain. Paul didn't get his kicks out of confrontation, and he wasn't excited to rebuke. Willing? Absolutely. Eager? Absolutely not. Again, he's modeling himself after the one who would drive the money changers out of the temple when necessary but who described himself as "gentle and lowly in heart" (Matt 11:29).

But now Paul gets explicit about his approach. He writes in verses 3-4, "For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh." That is, though we live in this world, our weapons are not the weapons that the world finds impressive. We don't go out into the world saying, "Wait till they see how powerful, wise, wealthy, bold, etc. I am, and then I'll really make a difference." No, those are the weapons of the world. And though we live in this flesh, we're not waging war on those terms. Our weapons are to seek to live in accord with Christ's character, take up and obey his Word, and proclaim his gospel. That is how we're going to seek to bring the world into submission to Jesus Christ.

But don't get the picture that we're embracing failure, knowing that we are doomed to have no success. Absolutely not. Paul adds, "For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy lofty argument and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete" (vv. 4-6).

Now, let's set the picture before diving into these details. The world, according to the Scriptures, is made up of unbelievers who are dead in their sins, following the course of this world, carrying out the desires of the flesh, and living under the power of the evil one (Eph 2:1-3). Although they know God exists because he's made himself known in the created order, they refuse to honor him as God and suppress the truth of God in their unrighteousness (Rom 1:18-32). Perhaps the most powerful example of this is seen in the guards at Jesus' tomb. Matthew tells us that on that Easter Sunday morning they saw an angel of the Lord descend from heaven, roll back the stone, and sit on it before they passed out from fear, and yet they were happy to take a bribe and say that Jesus didn't really rise from the dead. In other words, their problem wasn't insufficient evidence. It's that they were in moral rebellion against the Lord. So what's going to change their hearts? What's going to bring them life? What's going to destroy the strongholds that Satan and sin have on them? What's going to destroy their lofty arguments against the Lord and take their thoughts captive to Christ? It's not going to be when we come out and show that

we can measure up to what they tell us is impressive. It won't be our wisdom, riches, or strength. It'll be the Word of God, as we proclaim the gospel, and model what it looks like to follow Christ. We don't engage the world by letting them dictate the terms. They don't know what wisdom and strength really are because the wisdom and strength of God appear foolish and weak to them.

Now, this doesn't mean we don't take stands, call out sin, and confront those who seek to harm the church. Of course we do. That's why Paul notes that when the Corinthians are ready to obey, he wants them to join him in driving out these evildoers (i.e. "punish every disobedience, v. 6).

Let us then remember that as we seek to walk in obedience in the midst of a world in rebellion against Christ, we do not engage the world on their terms. We do not ask what they think is impressive and respond accordingly. We do not ask what they think is appropriate and attempt to fit that mode. We take our cues from Christ. We seek to live out his character, obey his commands, and proclaim his Word. And as we do that, we'll see the power of God displayed. That is where we start, but Paul says more. Next, he reminds us that we use our gifts for the building up of the church.

We use our gifts for the building up of the church

In verse 7 Paul calls the Corinthians to open their eyes. He writes, "Look at what is before your eyes." If they're still feeling the appeal of what Paul's opponents are saying, they need to open their eyes and simply look at what has been done through Paul in their lives as opposed to what has been done through his opponents. First, they both claim to belong to Christ. So, Paul grants that for the sake of argument (though he'll say otherwise later), writing, "If anyone is confident that he is Christ's, let him remind himself that just as he is Christ's, so also are we" (v. 7). But Paul is actually claiming something more. Paul is claiming that he has been sent as an apostle from Christ to the Corinthians for their salvation and obedience unto Christ. He comes with the authority of Christ for their good. He writes in verse 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."

In other words—and this is the key difference they should recognize between Paul and his opponents—everything Paul has done has been for the purpose of building up the church. Paul's opponents mock him for his strongly-worded letters, while he is gentle in person. Paul makes reference to this in verses 9-10, saying, "I do not want to appear to be frightening you with my letters. For they say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.'" But the reality is that even the way Paul writes and the way he's dealt in person were calculated for the building up of the church. He'd told them earlier in the letter that he didn't want to make a painful visit where he'd have to confront them in person, so he wrote the letter. He was trying to spare them. Why? Because he loves the church, and he only wants to do what is best for the church. He's always consistent in this,

adding in verse 11, “Let such a person understand that what we say by letter when absent, we do when present.”

One test the Corinthians should have applied when they thought about those telling them to dismiss Paul is, “Do these men seem to want to build up or destroy the church?” And if they had simply asked that they would have seen that these men were simply speaking ill of Paul, who’d brought them the gospel, taught them to obey Christ’s commands, and invested in them. They would have seen that these guys aren’t looking to build up but to tear down. Brothers and sisters, let’s make sure that we’re using our gifts, our words, and our resources to build up the church. Destroying comes easy. Building up takes effort. It can easily flow out of us if we have a complaint or negative critique. It takes diligent effort to make sure we speak encouraging words that might build up. As we seek to live the Christian life in the midst of a rebellion world, let’s make sure we’re using our gifts to build up the church. This will be another distinguishing factor for us in the church. As the world is attacking Christ’s people left and right, let us live our lives, standing out as the ones who seek with all that we are to build up the church. That is a second way we live in the midst of this world. And, finally, we keep our eyes on the Lord.

We keep our eyes on the Lord

For a second in verses 7-11 it seems that Paul is trying to answer the attacks made against him, but in verses 12-18 he makes sure that this isn’t his chief aim. Ultimately, he’s not worried about how his attackers measure him. He writes in verse 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 not interested in getting in a match of who can boast the most or appear most impressive.

His aim is simply to do the tasks that the Lord has given him in the arena the Lord has given him to do it. He writes, “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” (v. 13). And the Corinthians know this. Paul reminds them, “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” (V. 14). He has every right to invest in their lives, for that is what obedience to Christ requires. Paul’s attackers were wanting to jump in on work that Paul had begun, which is what he’s referencing when he writes in verse 15, “We do not boast beyond the limit in the labors of others.” And ultimately, Paul wants the relationship with the Corinthians solidified so that he might launch from them and continue to reach others with the gospel (v. 16). And all this leads him to conclude, “‘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” (vv. 17-18).

Paul is simply about the Lord. He only is looking to do what the Lord has authorized him to do. And he is only looking to the Lord to get commendation. He is not seeking his own glory or to get the commendation of the world. And isn’t this a helpful guide for us?

There is always a temptation for believers to want the world's commendation. And that is why there is always a temptation for believers to look to the world for what is valuable, or appropriate, and commendable. It's also why there's a temptation to compromise on the gospel. To go out to the world and declare that Jesus, the Son of God, came and lived a perfect life, died for our sins, and was raised from the dead so that by faith we could live forever, sounds foolish. And so we can feel the pull to want the world to say we're not fools. And it is in these times that we have to take a step back and say, "We are simply looking for the commendation of Christ who has told us to obey all that he commands."

And it helps us to remember what we noted earlier, namely, that Paul had written to the Corinthians in his first letter (that we have in Scripture), reminding that God chose the foolishness of the gospel to be the means by which men are saved precisely because he was attempting to destroy human wisdom, not appeal to it. Moreover, the reason he called me and you to him was precisely because we weren't impressive either. Paul reminds us, not many were wise, noble, or wealthy. But God chose what is weak to shame the strong. And so God's call to us is to realize our aim isn't to impress the world or to make the message we proclaim palatable to them. Don't forget the purposes and designs of our God. Rather, keep taking our cues from him, obey him, and trust in his wisdom and power.

How do we walk faithfully in the midst of a world in rebellion against Christ? Don't engage on their terms. Our weapons aren't to match them, but we arm ourselves with the character of Christ, preach his gospel, obey his Word, and proclaim his truth. In the midst of a world seeking to tear down believers, look to build up the church at every turn. And, finally, keep your eyes on the Lord, laboring under his authority and looking for his commendation. And let's fix our eyes on him now as we come to the table. Amen.