

Waging war in the way of Jesus

2 Corinthians 10:3-5

10/20/24

For almost three years now, ever since Russia invaded Ukraine, our *daily* news feed has included stories about the horrors of different wars. In fact, war is so frequent that I've lost track of the number of armed conflicts that have taken place around the world in my lifetime. But that's not new.

Warfare has been a part of human history from the earliest days, and it seems to have no end. Because it is such a consistent part of the human story, it can become a tool for teaching a related but perhaps unexpected lesson.

In our brief passage this morning Paul uses the image of siege warfare to explain the goal of his ministry and how, contrary to what some may believe, he is not being passive. Rather, he is engaged in an active campaign against the true enemy of all humankind.

I've chosen this morning not to explain how this fits into the conflict Paul was dealing with in Corinth. As important as that is, I think it detracts from the powerful message that comes through these three short verses.

Before we read them, it may be helpful to climb into Paul's world a little bit because his perspective on war and the way it was done is different than our own. Let's begin by thinking about war through a biblical lens.

Paul understood that the conflict and warfare we experience is part of a much larger story, the seeds of which are found in Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve rebelled against God. The seed they planted bore fruit in Genesis 4 when the first "war" broke out as Cain murdered his brother, Abel.

Like it was in Genesis 3, warfare begins inside of us when we choose to rely on our own ability and take matters into our own hands rather than trust God to define and do what is good. James put it this way (James 4:1-3).

What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don't they come from the evil desires at war within you? ² You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it. ³ And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure.

What starts inside of us spills out to impact those around us. When we gather support from our families, tribes or nations, the ensuing conflict can get terribly extreme. But it does not stop here.

Paul reminds the Ephesians that "...we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places."

What we see in this realm is connected to a battle taking place in a realm that we cannot see. It is no small thing that Genesis 3 reveals that all this began with a rebellious spiritual being that set humans down this path of derailing God's intent by disrupting God's shalom and twisting His good creation.

So, when Paul talks about warfare, he carries a deeper understanding than may not be at the forefront of our own minds. At the same time, he also carries a different picture of what warfare looks like.

In today's scripture Paul uses siege warfare as an illustration for his practice in ministry.¹ The Romans were masters at this and so everyone knew what Paul was talking about. It begins with a fortress that needs to be conquered.

A fortress is an unassailable safe haven. On a high hill or cliff rulers would build high walls and on those high walls they would build high towers. The Corinthians lived in the shadow of their own fortress built atop the Acro Corinth. We saw this photo last week.

The ruins in the foreground are Corinth and the mountain in the back is the upper Corinth, or Acro Corinth. This was the site of a great fortress. It was more than an 1800-foot climb to get to the dry moat that led to three heavily defended gates which were built into three layers of walls that stretched for more than one mile.

The Romans had many weapons for addressing a fortress. They had artillery that could throw heavy objects at the wall, breaking it apart bit by bit. Once a weak spot was found, they could use a battering ram to make a surgical strike at the target. They could undermine a wall's foundation through tunneling or overwhelm defenders with siege towers.

Once inside the fortress they would take everyone captive and force them to obey their new king. The weapons of Roman warfare were understood by everyone in Corinth.

So, Paul understood that behind human conflict there is a rebellious spiritual influence that seeks to disrupt and destroy God's good intent for creation. He knew that these spiritual forces were the actual enemy. The kind of conflict Paul used to describe his own ministry is one of Roman siege warfare. With this as our starting point, let's now move to the text. 2 Corinthians 10:3-5.

³ For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. ⁴ The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. ⁵ We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war—that is, we do not engage the opposition—the way the world does. Our weapons are not the ones you’ve seen and are so familiar with. No, ours are divinely powerful for destroying true strongholds.

Paul said we live in this world and experience life like everyone else does. Even so, we do not rely on human methods or human resources that are void of any real power. Things like polished rhetoric, social status, wealth, clever arguments, deception, anger, rage, malice, or slander won’t gain the most important objective. Although some wanted Paul to use the world’s weapons, he refused to do so because he knew that they can’t do the job.

Paul described his weapons back in chapter 6. They are purity, understanding, patience, kindness, love, truthful speech, and righteousness (right relationships) in the power of God. (6:6-7). Later in this letter he will share how weakness can be a weapon God uses and in other letters he speaks of prayer, meekness, gentleness, wisdom and holy conduct.

In short, divinely powerful weapons are found in the truth of the gospel expressed through words and displayed through a life surrendered to King Jesus. These are the tools Paul is bringing against Corinthian strongholds in a sustained and consistent effort.

The strongholds he wants to tear down are arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God and prohibits others from seeing the glory of God in the face of Christ. These are the high walls that Paul wants to pull down. In fact, the Greek word for demolish is a compound word that literally means, pull down.

Remember, Paul’s operating principle is that warfare is in both the physical and spiritual realm and the two are connected. So, Paul’s struggle in planting this new church is not just against some human rivals in Corinth. It is also against the “spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm.”

The strongholds are lofty ideas, arguments and presumptuous assertions that claim to be true but in reality are false. These are the things that gain a strong hold on the mind until those who are held, live as if that false thing is true.

Remember what Paul said in chapter 4? The New Living Translation puts it this way.

Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don’t believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News. They don’t understand this message about the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God.

From a worldly point of view it seems unlikely, but the weapons Paul uses do carry divine power to tear these structures down, take captive these ideas and make them obedient to Christ.

When we find something with which we do not agree or experience a wrong that we find offensive, the weapons of the world may lead us to express an immediate response of offense and anger. So we gather others of like mind and do something about it.

Smaller issues cause us to gather family or friends and may result in gossip and broken relationships. Larger issues could be expressed by larger groups in a protest with signs, speeches and something extreme that gets reported on the news. And still even larger issues can result in armed conflict between nations.

Gossip, complaining, protests and even wars can sometimes bring the result the offended party is looking for, but it is never lasting and always comes at a terrible cost. Only the divine power found in Paul's weapons can bring about the change God wants to see—the genuine repentance and faith that helps restore the shalom of God's creation one person and one relationship at a time.

At best, these strongholds distract us from the true gospel and at worst they become a false gospel in and of themselves. Either way, the stronghold has such a strong hold on the person that the person is unable to walk away and enter the gospel. In order for the person to experience the full wonder of the gospel, their false stronghold needs to be torn down and the idea and argument made captive and obedient to Christ.

Notice it is not the person who is pulled down, destroyed or taken captive. It is the fortress that was built in opposition to the gospel. It is the idea or belief that has kept the person from experiencing the freedom of the knowledge of God that comes through the Gospel of Christ.

Now, if you are still with me there is a chance you are thinking, "that sounds good, but I'm not the Apostle Paul. I didn't study under a great teacher and I don't have time to learn how to respond to all the arguments that are out there." I get it and feel that too.

Remember, Paul's siege was based on sharing the gospel through a life that was surrendered to King Jesus. Yes, his knowledge and training helped a ton, but it was not the starting point. If you know Jesus, you have the starting point to do what Paul was doing.

We can get the training we need. In a few weeks Doug Pollock will be here to help us see the ways we can share the good news with our neighbors and in January Paul Copan and Paul Gould will visit to help us see how we can defend the faith and help others begin to question the strongholds that hold them.

Demolishing arguments and taking every thought captive does not require an advanced degree. This only requires a clear vision of who Christ is and what he has done on the cross, in the resurrection and through the ascension. This is what we start with.

The battle Paul talks about is not intellectual, it is spiritual. It is aided by what we know but it is grounded in who we are in Christ and the transformation He brings into our lives.

And we must remember that the battle is not just between me and someone “out there.” The location for any battle is first found in my inner being. That’s where it began in Genesis chapter 3 and it continues there today. Do I trust God to show me what is good and right in this world, or am I compelled to construct it the way I want it to be?

Preparing this message has led me to ask, what strongholds hold me? What ideas and arguments have I picked up about myself, the world and God that keep me from more fully entering the freedom Christ has won? And it makes me wonder, what strongholds hold you?

What do you understand about yourself? Do you see yourself as God sees you, or do you view yourself through a different lens? Do those failures in the past define you today or maybe it is something you picked up in your childhood. Do you see yourself as God sees you?

What ideas guide your engagement with the world? Is your perspective anchored in what God has said or does it come from a different source? Is the world going to hell in a handbasket, or does it have a different future? In what do you place your ultimate hope? Science? The right legislation? The right person in the Oval Office? Is your true place of hope and peace found in the plans you have made and the way you are prepared to handle any future storms? Where have you placed your ultimate hope?

And finally, how does God fit into your life? What do you think God thinks of you? When God does think of you, what expression is on His face or what thoughts flow through His mind? Does your life reflect the belief in a God with a humble and gentle heart who loves you more than you can grasp, or does your life reveal that you follow a different god and, perhaps, a different gospel?

Every one of us has strongholds that have a strong hold on us. Like Psalm 19 says, some of these are hidden from us so we don’t even see them and some of these control us and force us to act in one way so often that that we think what we are doing is normal. No matter how hidden or obvious they may be, God wants to bring His divinely powerful weapons into your life to tear down those strongholds, capture those false conclusions and make them obey Christ.

God wants us to live inside the fortress and freedom of His true gospel, but to get us there, He first must free us from the fortresses we have made or accepted. Once a stronghold is identified, considering the source or origin of that stronghold can be a helpful exercise. Knowing how it was built can make it easier to tear it down.

Identifying a fortress, learning its source and then tearing it down are some of the things we do for each other in our small groups and Christ centered relationships. As iron sharpens iron, we help each other evaluate some of the things we believe and the conclusions we’ve made about ourselves, the world and God.

Later in this letter Paul will admonish the Corinthian Christians to examine themselves. This is something I know I could be more intentional about, maybe that is the same for you.

How well do I evaluate the conclusions I have made and the thoughts I have in light of the full gospel of Jesus?

Whether it is within us, with another Christian, or with one who does not believe the gospel, our goal is not to win the argument. Our goal is to lead ourselves or others into deeper obedience to Christ and a deeper awareness of the freedom He brings.

The battle has been going on for a very long time. When I take to heart that the battle is not actually against flesh and blood, I can begin to recognize that the enemy is not me nor is it the person sitting across from me. The true enemy is found in those forces that seek to block us and others from seeing the glory of God in the face of Christ.

Consider this. Paul described Christ's death in warfare terms when he said the cross disarmed the powers and authorities in the spiritual realm (Col 2:15).

Our Lord chose spiritual weapons. Peter tried to fight with the sword. Jesus rebuked him and fought with the cross. Jesus won the greatest battle of all, not by killing, but by dying. He said, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." So His disciples also fight not by killing their opponent, but by loving their opponent.

Our Lord's disciples fight not with deception, anger, rage, malice or slander, but with faith, righteousness and the word of God (Eph 6:10-18). It is a battle that starts with examining their own hearts and pulling down the strongholds they find there. And it continues in every conversation with other Christians and with anyone they meet with the goal of leading ourselves or others into deeper obedience to Christ and a deeper awareness of the freedom He brings

Martin Luther King Junior's famous quote seems to summarize this well for me. He said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." ⁱⁱ

These weapons are divinely powerful for pulling down the strongholds that truly matter.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, You have already won the ultimate victory on the cross. Yet, like mop up operations in World War 2, we still have skirmishes against the powers and principalities (Eph 6:10-18). Help us see ourselves, the world and you in ways that are faithful to what is true so that we might more clearly reflect the truth of your good news with our lives. We look forward to the day when you return to silence all wars forever and restore shalom to your fully redeemed creation. Begin with us. Set us free and lead us to join you in your great work.

ⁱ Depicting the Christian life as a military operation is a common theme for Paul. Rom. 13:12; 1 Cor. 9:7; 2 Cor. 6:7; Eph. 6:11-17; Phil. 2:25; 1 Thess. 5:8; 1 Tim. 1:18; 6:12; 2 Tim. 2:3-4; 4:7; Phim. 2.

ⁱⁱ in his sermon, "Loving Your Enemies," at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama on November 17, 1957.