

HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

2 Corinthians 10:1–6

Dr. George O. Wood

The title of my message is “How to Defend Yourself.”

“By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you—I, Paul, who am ‘timid’ when face to face with you, but ‘bold’ when away! I beg you that when I come I may not have to be as bold as I expect to be toward some people who think that we live by the standards of this world. For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. 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. And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete” (2 Corinthians 10:1–6, NIV).

With the first verse of chapter 10, we really begin the third part of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians. Chapters 10–13 are much different in tone from the earlier part of the letter. They’re much more severe. Paul is involved, in these chapters, in the defense of his apostleship.

Someone has described the outline of 2 Corinthians as: the first seven chapters dealing with the theme of living; chapters 8 and 9 dealing with the theme of giving; and chapters 10–13 dealing with the theme of guarding. As we open to 2 Corinthians 10, and find Paul beginning a defense of his apostleship, we might well say, “Why is all that necessary?” We must remember that, in the Early Church, there was a different situation than what prevails now. In those days, all the cults were still inside the church. All the people who were the equivalent to the Jehovah Witnesses or the Mormons or the Christian Scientists or the Church of Religious Science or

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whatever—who had far different views of Jesus than what was taught by the apostles or by Jesus himself—still were within the membership of the church, combating or rivaling one another, if you will, for position and for being claimants to the ones who really had right doctrine. It was necessary, therefore, for the apostles to defend the truth that Jesus had delivered to them regarding what is true and genuine worship toward God.

Therefore, at Corinth, there had been a real attack against Paul’s apostleship from those kinds of groups that today would really be on the outside of the body of Christ looking in. They’d be better identified and labeled today than they were then.

There are really two kinds of conflicts that happen in churches. One type of conflict is a substantive kind of conflict, which deals with matters of doctrine and truth. Another kind of conflict is simply interpersonal. It’s due to personality conflicts. The type of conflict at Corinth is one that is substantive in character.

In verses 1–6, you can read between the lines and very clearly see in these six verses that two things are being said against the apostle. One is that he is rather bold in his letters, but rather timid and non-forceful when you see him in person. Paul evidently was not all that impressive a personality. That was one of the criticisms against him. He really is strong when you meet him in his letters, but when you see him face to face he’s really not all that impressive.

People are often looking for leaders that look like leaders. Whether they are leaders or not, it doesn’t matter. Today we expect somebody who’s president to look “presidential.” We expect somebody who’s a United States senator to look like a United States senator. We expect someone in a place of religious authority to look like he is a person of religious authority.

Paul evidently didn’t look like much like a religious leader. In fact, one of the works of the early second century that describes the physical appearance of the apostle Paul notes that he is short,

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balding and bowlegged, or bandy-legged. Not all that impressive a visage. This is one of the criticisms against him—“He doesn’t look like much of a leader when you see him face to face.”

That, of course, teaches us to exercise caution that we don’t fall into the same trap of assuming that simply because a person looks like a leader, therefore, it means that they are a leader.

A second charge against Paul was that whatever he did, he did out of selfish interests. He lived according to the standards of this world. The word literally is “He lived according to the flesh.” He lived according to worldly standards. Therefore, he was in it for himself. Whatever he had to offer the church was simply based on the selfish motive that he had.

This is therefore a thing which he must respond to, the authority of right doctrine is to be kept within the church. We may know all those things historically. Maybe when we get done with it, we adopt an attitude like I adopted after I got done with the early part of my message preparation, doing the kind of Bible study work necessary to sort of flesh out the text. You stand back from it, and you realize you’re going to stand up on Sunday morning and preach to people with twentieth-century problems, and you’re dealing with a first-century issue of apostolic authority. You come to the whole bottom line and you say, “So what?”

So, what does it mean to anybody that Paul successfully defended his apostleship twenty centuries ago? So what? Yeah, we have the New Testament and we wouldn’t have had it if he hadn’t had done it, but so what? How does that relate to me? It seemed to me, when I read it with that kind of a question in mind, that some really dynamic new truths opened up for me. That is simply that all of us as Christians find times in our life where we need to defend ourselves when we are under attack. There are even times when we have a fight with someone. We’ve always been told that Christians never argue with anybody. Christians never fight with anyone. But the New Testament is filled with evidence that sometimes that’s the case over even substantive

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issues. Sometimes, it's simply over personality, interpersonal issues. But we ought to have some ground rules on how to have a Christian fight. How do you go about defending yourself?

This Scripture has some great truths for us to use in this whole art of “how to have a Christian fight” or “how to defend yourself.” I want to divide this message into two broad areas.

I. First, I want to talk about what Paul did *not* do in defending himself.

As you read verses 1–6 and on through 10–13, you'll find there are some methods he did *not* employ, which, from time to time, I'll be frank to confess, I *have* employed in defending myself—much to my shame.

A. The first thing Paul did not do is throw his weight around. He did not begin defending himself by throwing his weight around. He did not say, “You Corinthians! I'm an apostle and I've spoken on this issue and that ought to settle it. I'm the authority around here and I don't have to give you reasons for anything I believe or anything I do. It's taken on faith, brothers and sisters. God made me the authority. It's up to you to listen and come under it. Accept me and what I say and that's it. If you doubt it, I've got the last word. I am the authority.”

You say, how would I apply that on a personal level? How about an argument between a husband and wife, where the husband finally gets exasperated and says, “I'm the head of this house. That's the way it's going to be, whether you like it or not”? That is throwing your weight around, guys.

Someone may give money to a ministry. Fortunately, to my knowledge, this has never happened in this church body, thanks to God, but I know of cases where a person may have invested in the work of the King and then they come back later and say, “I gave so much money to that ministry and this is what I want it to do. If you don't, I'm going to yank the rug out from under you.”

Throwing your weight around.

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There's a favorite Scripture that pastors use when they're asked questions and their authority is questioned. I had a friend who was being challenged in something. I made a prediction to myself about maybe what his sermon was going to be the next Sunday morning, and I was right. I guessed it—"Touch not the Lord's anointed" (1 Samuel 24:6). That's a favorite text of preachers. When you look through the New Testament, you will never find a New Testament leader ever appealing to that Old Testament Scripture to support their position. That is a valid principle—not to touch the Lord's anointed—but in the New Testament sense, we're all the Lord's anointed and we ought not touch one another in that kind of a sense (1 John). But you do not have a defense, a Christian defense, that begins by simply throwing your weight around.

B. The second technique that Paul does not use is that he does not try to manipulate others through self-pity. This is a common technique when we get into some kind of conflict. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself for what you're doing to me! Do you know how hard I've worked for you? Do you know all I've done for you this week? If you only knew! Shame! I worked my fingers to the bone. You should have more appreciation for me than you have." Of course, that's a technique that does two things. It dumps blame on another person, and it appeals to their pitying you. So you are appealing to self-pity. Paul does not do this. "Look at what a good apostle I am for you. I laid down my life for you. Remember how I worked among you—my concerns have been for all the churches. You shouldn't really be occupying my time by getting me involved in these kinds of problems. Shame on you. No decent church would treat an apostle the way you're treating me. Nothing like this."

The first thing he repudiates, as a method of engaging in defense, is the idea of throwing in the towel of Christian service because somebody else had been unkind or unfair to him. That's often

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the case when we get treated unkindly or unfairly. We say, “See if I ever do that again! That’s what I get for being nice. That’s what I get for giving my time.”

How many times has the devil used, as a strategy in the church, the whole fresh volunteer spirit of someone whom the Lord has touched, who gets involved in the church, gets involved in teaching a Sunday School class, gets involved in this ministry or that ministry. They get involved and, before you know it, somebody comes along and criticizes them for what they’re doing. They say, “I’m not even getting paid for this! Forget it.” And they throw in the towel of Christian service. Paul doesn’t say, “I’m tired of all of this and I’ll throw in my apostleship. This isn’t worth it. I’m a tent maker. I’m capable of supporting myself. What am I doing this for?” He doesn’t use those techniques to defend himself.

II. How does he defend himself? Three positive steps are used.

A. The first is found in verse 1. He follows the Lord’s example in defending himself, “By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you.” How did the Lord minister? How did He defend himself? Not with threats, braggadocio, bluster, not with saying “I’ll get even with you for this!” The Lord says, in Matthew 11:28, “I am meek and lowly of heart.” Jesus sought to resolve conflict, not on the power level, but on the love level. Through the meekness and gentleness of Christ.

Those two words reflect the style of the Lord’s example in defending ourselves.

“Meekness”—probably what most of us think of when we first come to that word meekness is “weakness,” “timidity,” a milquetoast kind of personality. It’s really regrettable that the biblical word that’s used in the English, “meekness,” comes across that way, because it’s a far stronger word. But there are so many complex ideas associated with the word that there is no one English word that adequately translates what underlies this word. Some of the concepts the Greeks use in

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underlying the word Paul uses for meekness is the idea of a wild horse that has been broken, so that now its energies are channeled under a bit and bridle and saddle. It isn't going off in all directions. It has a controlled response. Its energies are being used in a disciplined sense.

Aristotle used the word to describe the medium between two extremes.

In taking this and putting it into the biblical text, a meek person is a person of strength, a person whose core or fiber is steel—that has a touch of velvet, if you would allow that kind of illustration—who has a controlled and disciplined response, and is seen as responding to difficulties with a soft touch. But that soft touch shouldn't be misread as being weakness or failure, to have no backbone, because underneath that strong touch is a resolve of steel.

Paul uses the word some eight times in his thirteen letters. Meekness is the eighth fruit of the spirit in Galatians 5:23. It is the necessary quality for restoring someone who has fallen.

Galatians 6:1 says, “You who are spiritual ought to restore that individual in a spirit of meekness.” It is a spirit that one who corrects false teachers should have. 2 Timothy 2:25 says, “Those who oppose the Lord's service he must meekly instruct.” Why would you want to use the word “meekly” in regard to apologetics, defending the faith against false teachers?

Because your purpose in giving a theological argument, your purpose in defending your faith, is not to win the argument but to win the other person. The presence of meekness in your life gives you the power not to blow another person up, but to build another person up. So many times, when we get into a standoff with somebody, we want to blow them out of the water. And we want to blow their argument out of the water. But the Christian purpose is not to *blow* somebody up, but to *build* somebody up. Meekness is that attribute that helps us do that.

In fact, the word “meekness” is frequently used in conjunction with two other words, “humility” and “patience.” You see this especially in Ephesians 4:2, where Paul says, “Be completely

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humble and meek. Be patient, bearing with one another in love.” Those words of “humility” and “patience” are kind of like the sandwich words, with “meekness” in the center. They condition it. So following the example of Christ means we approach differences with a spirit of meekness, not a spirit of throwing our weight around. It also means we approach those matters with a spirit of gentleness. The underlying Greek word is used six times in the New Testament, and it conveys the idea of a person who is not harsh, but who is willing to give the other person the benefit of the doubt, who is willing to give clemency. A person who doesn’t have this quality of gentleness is an individual who lives by the letter of the law. A person who has this spirit of gentleness is willing to say, “I know you didn’t meet the letter of the law, but let’s back off and give more room. Let’s exercise a generous kind of spirit.” The word can be used to describe a sweet reasonableness. It is the opposite of being harsh.

As a pastor and as a man of God, everyone expects me to be a nice man. But when I’m under stress and I’m tired, I know I’m safe with my family. I can raise my voice and have a negative tone of voice, all those things. That’s where most of us have our great need for improvement, because we’re all such wonderful people, but we’re safe within family. Here is the place where gentleness is most needed.

I listen to family conversations in restaurants and the like and I’m amazed as I listen in to what I see as a growing amount of verbal abuse in our society. “Shut up, kid, and eat!” and all those kind of things. Verbal abuse, not gentleness, is being practiced in spirit. A gentle person is the opposite of one who has the retaliatory spirit. The retaliatory spirit says, “I’m going to make you look stupid. I’m going to prove you wrong.” The gentle spirit recognizes that it does not have to tear someone else down to build oneself up. Gentleness.

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I don't know if you've seen this in the news or not. There's a Pentecostal church in Texas where the members have been at odds with one another the last three years. They've done things like sue one another, pour glue in the locks of the church doors to keep the other group out and pour olive oil on the organ! That keeps the other group from playing it. The state district judge was quoted as saying, "If I had the authority, I would order this church to be sold and give the money to another church." Naturally, the congregation has dwindled as a result of this, from a hundred and forty to less than two dozens. What happened? They did not approach their dispute with the meekness and gentleness of Christ. It's obvious that they didn't do that.

What is obvious about how we settle our disputes with other people? Are we asking for the Lord to deliver us from a spirit of harshness? Following the Lord's example means fighting with gentleness and meekness.

B. A second counsel the apostle gives us in defending ourselves is that we're to use the Lord's weapons (verses 2–5). If we're going to fight, we need weapons. So Paul is embracing a military metaphor in these verses. The choice is: What weapons will we use? Spiritual weapons, that is, godly weapons? Or worldly weapons? Literally, Paul says in verses 2–4, "I beg you that when I come I may not have to be as bold as I expect to be towards some people who think that we live by the flesh, or according to the flesh, for though we live in the flesh, we do not wage war as the flesh does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the flesh."

Paul is giving us a very foundational principle by the word "flesh". The Greek word really means two things: "the skin"—our humanity, our physical frame. Paul says, "It's true I live in the flesh." Christ himself was made flesh, made skin and bones like us. But he says, "The Christian does not live according to the flesh. There's a difference between living in the flesh and according to the flesh. The arms of our warfare are not fleshly."

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How does the flesh defend itself? The flesh defends itself with all of the principles of fallen human nature. That's the second major aspect of the flesh. It defends itself with all the aspects of fallen human nature, apart from God. Galatians 5:19–20 gives a whole list of the works of the flesh. When we are involved in conflict and the flesh begins defending itself, we will expect to see evidence—wrongful use of anger, rage, selfish interest, envy, retaliation, and all of those kind of things—being thrown at someone else. Those are the weapons of the flesh. “I’m going to get you, if it’s the last thing I do. I’ll prove I’m right!”

But the weapons of the Spirit are different—they are found in Ephesians 5:11–18—truth, righteousness, witness, faith, salvation, the Word, prayer, to name a few of the weapons of the Spirit.

A rule of thumb in the Christian fight is “Don’t become *like* the devil in *fighting* the devil.” I’m intrigued by a very mystical verse in the Book of Jude. I’m not sure I know the meaning in its entirety. But I know one thing it does mean. The verse says something like this, “Even the angel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not dare to bring a slanderous accusation against him but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you.’” Freely translated or amplified, that goes something like this: “There was a dispute between God’s archangel, Michael, and the fallen archangel, the devil, over the disposition of Moses’ body. Michael could have used that time as a time of heaping verbal abuse upon the devil, telling him what a nasty fallen angel he was. But Michael didn’t act like the devil when he was fighting the devil. Instead, he brought no railing accusation against him and simply said, ‘The Lord rebuke you.’ And left it to the Lord to take care of it.” Michael did not become like the devil in fighting the devil. There is no need for us, as Christians, when we get in conflict, to become like the devil, to fight the devil.

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If we will use the weapons that are spiritually available to us, we will overthrow strongholds and high places. The NIV translates this as “pretensions.” The idea here is kind of a military metaphor, when you’re assaulting a ridge. Like on D-Day, the Omaha beach with the cliffs overhead. Those were strongholds. Those were high places, areas that were very difficult to get to. But once they come down, the effect of the battle has been forever changed. Paul says we, with these spiritual weapons, take strongholds, difficult places, which we would never capture with fleshly weapons. We capture them and, in doing so, we bring every thought captive to the Lord Jesus Christ.

For many years, that Scripture “bringing every thought captive to Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5), has sort of whipped a lot of us Christians, because we realized that sometimes we have thoughts that are not captive. We’re seeking to bring them captive. But in the sense in which it is used in this passage, it has to do with—as we are engaged in spiritual warfare—seeking to win someone else, not fighting but living life in a spiritual way, we, by our example, will help to bring them underneath the captivity of Jesus Christ. So that their thoughts, like ours, will become captive to the Lord.

I was reading some pages again this week out of David Wilkerson’s autobiography *The Cross and the Switchblade*. I see this happening in his conversion ministry to Nicky Cruz, the tough Puerto Rican gang leader on the streets of New York. Here’s the conversation, verbatim, when David meets Nicky for the first time.

“‘How do you do, Nicky?’ I said. He left me standing with my hand outstretched. He wouldn’t even look at me. He was puffing away at a cigarette, shooting nervous little gusts of smoke out of the side of his mouth. ‘Go to hell, preacher,’ he said. He had an odd strangled way of speaking and he stuttered badly over some of his sounds. ‘You don’t think much of me, Nicky,’ I said,

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‘But I feel different about you. I love you, Nicky.’ I took a step toward him. ‘You come near me preacher,’ he said, in that tortured voice, ‘and I’ll kill you.’” Classic confrontation. The weapons of the Spirit: love. The weapons of the flesh: anger and threat—and Nicky Cruz is the stronghold, the high place. “‘You could do that, that is, kill me,’ I agreed. ‘You could cut me in a thousand pieces and lay them out in the street and every piece would love you.’” And Nicky Cruz went away, and that’s what kept ringing in his ear, “‘You could cut me in a thousand pieces,’” preacher David said to him, “and every piece would still be crying out ‘I love you.’” And Nicky Cruz wound up giving his life to Christ. Someone had fought with him on the spiritual level, not on the carnal level.

The mightiest weapon the Christian has is the weapon of love. Fight with the Lord’s weapons in your battles.

C. The third way to defend yourself is to use punishment as the last resort. Verse 6 says, “And we would be ready to punish every act of disobedience once your obedience is complete.” What need would he have to punish anybody if they all become obedient? For the majority of the church that does become obedient, if any punishment needs to be done when Paul arrives later to Corinth, the punishment then will be given and it will not be a physical punishment but the punishment of excommunication. He appeals twice to obedience. Verse 5, “...obedient to Christ.” Verse 6, “...your obedience is complete.”

I always like to get to the root of words. What does “obedience” really mean? The Greek word means, literally, “to under hear.” It means “to place yourself under that which you have heard.” It means that, in placing yourself under that which you have heard, you not only agree with it, but you become bound by it. It becomes the governing, the overseeing, the over-lording element of

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your life. That's the goal of the Christian life: to place yourself under the Word and under the authority of the Lord.

Are you in conflict with someone? Have you placed your response to that conflict under Jesus' direction? Have you become obedient to the direction He gives you? Are the weapons you are using in the conflict the weapons the Lord has selected for you? Is your spirit in the conflict one of gentleness and meekness?

Closing Prayer

Our gracious Father, we thank You for these moments we have with Your Word. The entrance of Your Word gives life. I'm sure this message, for persons who are involved in conflict, has been like the turning on of a bright light bulb in their life, and has given them insight in knowing how to resolve and knowing how to go about some of the difficulties they are facing. I thank You for that. Lord, the conflict we never want to have is a conflict with You. If there are persons in here today that have a conflict with You of any kind—maybe a conflict that has resulted in their never turning their life over to You as Savior and Lord, maybe a conflict in which You've spoken to them very clearly through Your Word, or intuitively through the Holy Spirit into their life about taking a particular course of action and they've not yet become an "under-hearer"—Lord, we pray that the entrance of Your Word would give light. Help us to be obedient, from all of our heart, to You. Forgive people who are wrestling with these tough areas of matters of relationship, especially within family. Give us Your insight, Your guidance into seeing how, through our words and actions, we can build each other up rather than blowing one another up. Give us the gentleness of the Spirit, the meekness and firmness of Christ. We ask this, Lord, in Your name, as we come to this time of prayer, where we invite people to come. We ask that Your healing presence would be here to heal body and spirit and soul today. That this would be a time of

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blessing and refreshing, as we open our lives to You in worship and in praise once more. We ask these things in Your name. Amen.