

Dealing With False Teachers



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *2 Cor. 10:1–17; Jer. 9:24; 2 Cor. 11:1–15, 22–28; 2 Cor. 12:20, 21; 2 Cor. 13:5.*

Memory Text: “For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds” (*2 Corinthians 10:4, ESV*).

As if Paul didn't have enough problems already, another one arose that he had to deal with as well: false teachers in the church. These people were opposed to him and to his work and ministry. Worse, these false teachers had seduced members of Corinth as well. Paul refers to his fight against this problem as a spiritual war.

Would that be an exaggeration? Not at all. Paul knew that, ultimately, those people were opposing not him but Christ Himself. He was not the narcissistic type of leader concerned about maintaining his reputation as a means of legitimizing his power and authority over his subordinates. He knew that the message he was commissioned to preach was a matter of life or death, with eternal consequences. And he knew that he had been sent to do it by God Himself: “Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God” (*1 Cor. 1:1*).

When it comes to false teachings, the church is supposed to act with love but firmness, based on the authority of Scripture. The gospel message must be conserved, unspoiled and pure, in order to give souls the hope of eternity.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 19.

Spiritual War

Read 2 Corinthians 10:1–11. Paul’s meekness in his dealings with the Corinthians was sometimes confused with weakness. What words or phrases in this passage reveal Paul’s courage in dealing with the problem of false teachers in Corinth?

Paul begins 2 Corinthians 10 very personally: “Now I, Paul, make a personal appeal to you” (2 Cor. 10:1, HCSB). This shows how concerned Paul was about false teachings infiltrating the church. His words in 2 Corinthians 10:1 ironically refer to his opponents’ accusation that he was a frightening bully when writing letters from a distance but a pitiful coward when dealing with people face-to-face (2 Cor. 10:10, 11). He responds that what seemed to be weakness should be seen as powerful meekness and Christlike gentleness.

False teachers must be faced with boldness and confidence (2 Cor. 10:2) but mingled with the gentleness of Christ (2 Cor. 10:1). Jesus once said, “I am gentle and humble in heart” (Matt. 11:29, NIV). However, Jesus also boldly confronted the money changers in the temple by overturning their tables and calling them robbers (Matt. 21:12, 13). He also called the Pharisees hypocrites and whitewashed tombs right to their faces (Matt. 23:23–27). Like Jesus, Paul also knows that we are in a spiritual war that demands the use of God’s whole armor (Eph. 6:12–17).

Paul’s language in 2 Corinthians 10 is military because lives are at stake (2 Cor. 10:3–6). This is not a mere human conflict but a divine battle for winning people to Christ. In that connection, every false argument and lofty opinion must be faced and demolished, based on the Word of God, so that every thought may be brought into captivity “to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5, NIV).

In this spiritual warfare, Paul acts in the authority of Christ. This authority, however, aims at edification, not destruction (2 Cor. 10:8). It is easy for spiritual leaders to affirm that they are acting in the authority of God. Nevertheless, they must remember that their authority is given by Christ, and, like Him, they must be meek and humble in heart. Paul’s claim of his Christ-given authority is due to his concern that the Corinthians were listening to the wrong people, thereby risking their loyalty to Christ.

How can we be simultaneously gentle and bold when dealing with false teachers? Why must we be both?

Boasting in the Lord

Yesterday, we saw that Paul and his fellow workers exerted their ministries as a spiritual warfare, and did so using God's weapons. Today, we will see that false teachers act according to human criteria. They boast inappropriately. In turn, Paul boasts only in the Lord. As he wrote: "But 'he who glories, let him glory in the LORD' " (*2 Cor. 10:17, NKJV*).

Read 2 Corinthians 10:13–17. How can an atmosphere of competitiveness harm the preaching of the gospel?

Paul's use of self-boasting language has intrigued interpreters throughout the centuries. However, self-boasting was a common practice in the ancient world and was controlled by social conventions to avoid offending the audience. Paul knew such conventions, and he followed them. In addition, Paul makes it clear that his way of boasting distinguishes itself from that of the false teachers. He boasts in the Lord (*2 Cor. 10:17*). This is a quotation from the Old Testament: "Let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth' " (*Jer. 9:24, ESV*). By quoting this passage from Jeremiah, Paul shows that it is Christ who is in focus—Christ's love, justice, and righteousness.

In other words, Paul's boasting focuses on God's accomplishments in Christ. Thus, his boasting is biblical and, hence, inoffensive. On the other hand, his opponents got into an atmosphere of competitiveness by comparing themselves to one another. This is foolishness (*2 Cor. 10:12*).

In 2 Corinthians 10:14–16, Paul hints that preaching the gospel is the primary focus of his ministry, both in Corinth and in regions beyond Corinth. Paul's love for Jesus led him to talk constantly about the good news of salvation, found in the death and resurrection of Christ.

Unlike the false teachers in Corinth who commended themselves, Paul had been commended and approved by God (*2 Cor. 10:12, 18*). He was "called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God" (*1 Cor. 1:1, NKJV*). He was faithful to this calling until the end of his life (*2 Tim. 4:7*).

Reread 2 Corinthians 10:12–18. How can church leaders, or even members, avoid an atmosphere of competition? Why is it so easy to get caught up in things that really don't matter?

False Teachers Identified

The New Testament contains several warnings against false teachers in Christian communities. Jesus Himself warned the disciples about this same thing (*Matt. 7:15–20*). The apostles also called attention to it (*Gal. 1:6–9, 1 Tim. 6:3–5, 2 Pet. 2:1–3*).

Read 2 Corinthians 11:1–15. How does Paul depict the challenges that he is facing with these false teachers?

Paul unmasks the work of false teachers. At the same time, he indicates that his ministry is Christ-centered. He compares the church in Corinth to a bride and identifies himself as her father, with the responsibility to present her to Christ (*2 Cor. 11:2*). He does so because he loves the church (*2 Cor. 11:11*). So, he was even willing not to be a financial burden to it, even though he had the right to be supported by it (*2 Cor. 11:7–12*).

On the other hand, the “most eminent apostles” (ironically, this likely refers to the false teachers) are compared to the serpent that deceived Eve (*2 Cor. 11:3*). Like Satan in the Garden of Eden, the false teachers in Corinth are characterized by deceit and corruption (*2 Cor. 11:3, 4, NKJV*). Paul’s main concern was that they could lead the Corinthians astray from their sincere devotion and allegiance to Christ.

The intruders preached a different message than Paul preached—a different Jesus and a different gospel (*2 Cor. 11:4*). This shows that not everyone who preaches Jesus is a God-commissioned instrument. In that regard, Jesus Himself said, “ ‘Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven’ ” (*Matt. 7:21, NKJV*). In Galatians 1:6–9, Paul says that whoever preaches a different gospel brings a curse upon himself, but some in Corinth tolerated this kind of error.

Paul exposes the false apostles by saying that they are “deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ” (*2 Cor. 11:13, NKJV*). They disguise themselves as apostles of Christ, just as “Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” and “his [Satan’s] servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness” (*2 Cor. 11:14, 15, ESV*). What a tragic situation: professing servants of Christ working as agents of Satan. Paul concludes his thought by saying that their “end will be according to their works” (*2 Cor. 11:15, NKJV*).

Look at how strongly he is reacting to error in the church! What should that say to us, as well?

Sufferings for the Sake of the Gospel

After exposing the false teachers as agents of Satan (*2 Cor. 11:1–15*), Paul now “plays” their game by boasting a little as a fool might (*2 Cor. 11:16–21*) so that the Corinthians could see how senseless it was to give ears to the false teachers’ speech. If the Corinthians held them in high regard, Paul deserved higher consideration. His sufferings for the gospel show that he was a faithful servant of Christ (*2 Cor. 11:22, 23*).

Read 2 Corinthians 11:22–28. What point is Paul making here?

While Paul’s Jewish credentials are identical to those of the false teachers (*2 Cor. 11:22*), his service to Christ surpasses theirs (*2 Cor. 11:23*). “Are they ministers of Christ?” he asks. The answer is “I am more.” His labors were more abundant; his imprisonments, more frequent; his beatings, more severe.

But this is not all. His list of sufferings also includes five instances of thirty-nine strokes (*2 Cor. 11:24*), beatings with rods, stoning, shipwrecks, danger in deep waters (*2 Cor. 11:25*), danger at journeys, danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from countrymen, danger from Gentiles, danger in crowded cities, danger in desolate country, danger at sea, danger from false believers (*2 Cor. 11:26*), strenuous labors, exhausting toils, sleepless nights, hunger, thirst, food shortage, cold, and nakedness (*2 Cor. 11:27*). As if that weren’t enough, he still had to deal with mental anguish because of his deep anxiety for the churches (*2 Cor. 11:28*).

Only a true servant of Christ would be willing to suffer like this for the gospel. If Paul were really to boast about his sufferings, he had much to say. However, the next section of the letter shows that the reason for his boast was based not on what he did for Christ but on what Christ had done for him. Paul knew that God’s power is more visibly displayed in human weakness (*2 Cor. 12:9, 10*). By giving him a thorn in the flesh (*2 Cor. 12:7*), God protected Paul from boasting about his accomplishments. This kept him humble, aware of his weakness, dependent on divine power, and in the condition of receiving more of God’s grace and mercy.

Have you also been suffering for the sake of the gospel? What have you learned from this experience? How can the way Paul dealt with his sufferings help you deal with yours?

Appeal to the Unrepentant

In 2 Corinthians 12:14–13:10, Paul informs the church about his third visit (*2 Cor. 12:14, 2 Cor. 13:1*). He had shown that he is not inferior to any of the false apostles and is now confident to come to Corinth once again and try to restore unrepentant members. In fact, this was one of the primary purposes of this visit. All Paul did and spoke was meant for the edification of the church (*2 Cor. 12:19*).

Read 2 Corinthians 12:20, 21. What sins were jeopardizing the spiritual condition of the Corinthian church?

The list of sins in 2 Corinthians 12:20, 21 is similar to others found elsewhere in Paul's letters (*Rom. 1:29–31, Gal. 5:19–21*). The first two items appear in 1 Corinthians 3:3, where Paul refers to jealousy and strife among the members in Corinth. Paul fears that things would not be too different by the time of his third visit. He says, "I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish." Conversely, he says, "You may find me not as you wish" (*2 Cor. 12:20, ESV*). This means that rather than dealing with them "by the meekness and gentleness of Christ" (*2 Cor. 10:1, ESV*), he would now be "ready to punish every disobedience" (*2 Cor. 10:6, ESV*).

His main concern is that those members who had been involved with "impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality" may not have repented (*2 Cor. 12:21, ESV*). And it is sins such as these that cause divisions in the church.

Next, Paul focuses on the role of church discipline to restore those in sin (*2 Cor. 13:1–4*). Weakness is not an excuse for a sinful way of life. There is power available for those who want to live a victorious life (*2 Cor. 13:4*). The fact that some in Corinth practiced sexual sin is evidence that God's power was not a reality in their lives. Paul wanted them to repent and experience the power that leads to obedience. Disciplining them was the last thing he wanted to do. He says, "We pray to God that you may not do wrong . . . , but that you may do what is right. . . . Your restoration is what we pray for" (*2 Cor. 13:7–9, ESV*). What a beautiful prayer! He asks them to examine themselves to see whether they are in the faith.

Read 2 Corinthians 13:5. What does it mean to be in the faith? How can you know that you are in the faith?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Laodicean Church,” p. 125, in *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 30, 1873.

“The Lord is guarding his people against a repetition of the errors and mistakes of the past. There have always abounded false teachers who, advocating erroneous doctrines and unholy practices, and working upon false principles in a most specious, covered, deceptive manner, have endeavored to deceive, if possible, the very elect.”—Ellen G. White, in *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 7, 1904.

“The Lord designs that our opinions shall be put to the test, that we may see the necessity of closely examining the living oracles to see whether or not we are in the faith. Many who claim to believe the truth have settled down at their ease, saying, ‘I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing.’”—Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, p. 36.

“Men entertain errors, when the truth is clearly marked out; and if they would but bring their doctrines to the word of God, and not read the word of God in the light of their doctrines, to prove their ideas right, they would not walk in darkness and blindness, or cherish error. Many give the words of Scripture a meaning that suits their own opinions, and they mislead themselves and deceive others by their misinterpretations of God’s word. As we take up the study of God’s word, we should do so with humble hearts. All selfishness, all love of originality, should be laid aside. Long-cherished opinions must not be regarded as infallible.”—Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, pp. 36, 37.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Read 2 Corinthians 10:1–6 again. What is Paul’s strategy to face spiritual “wars” for God’s truth, and how can we apply it to our own spiritual wars?
- 2 The Bible says that before the end comes, many false teachers would try to lure people away from the truth. What can your local church do to prevent members from being persuaded by false teachers who might even be in your same church? Why is this so essential for the fulfillment of the church’s mission?
- 3 Why did Paul find it necessary to boast about a long list of sufferings (2 Cor. 11:16–33)? Also, what does it mean “to boast in the Lord”?
- 4 Why is it important for church members to examine themselves in order to see whether they are in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5)? What difference does it make?

BLESS You! Part 2

By OFFICE OF ADVENTIST MISSION

Rob and Bethany are church planters in Copenhagen, Denmark. But before this, they learned principles of relationship-based ministry while they started a church in Squamish, British Columbia.

There, they made a friend who had grown up in an Adventist home but whose experiences had left him skeptical and jaded. The Christian path he had been shown was unbalanced, with prophecy studies intermingled with conspiracy theories and anxiety replacing the peace of salvation. As an adult, he distanced himself entirely.

But over time, something about Rob and Bethany's way of living began to break down his defenses. They invited him into their lives—meals, conversations, shared routines.

He watched them. He listened. "He could sense that what we were doing was real," Rob said. "We weren't just going through motions. We were trying to live like Jesus. We really cared about him and wanted to be his friend."

When a personal crisis hit, the man reached out—not to a church, but to the family he'd grown to trust. He began to ask questions. And eventually, he chose to believe again—but this time, in a Jesus he'd never known before.

Now he's a passionate Christian, committed and transformed.

And it started with simple things: listening, serving, and living the gospel through daily life.

"There's nothing more exciting than being part of someone's spiritual journey," Rob reflected. "Start with the basics—begin with prayer, listen, eat, serve, and when the time comes, share. That's how Jesus did it. And that's how hearts are still changed today."

Now in Copenhagen, Rob and Bethany meet new friends in their neighborhood and through local events. Their home is open for fellowship and shared meals on a regular basis. They are always on the lookout for who they can invest in—listening, serving, supporting, sharing. From their past experience, they know that this is the most effective way to love people today. And they pray daily that God will bless them with real friendships along this church-planting journey.

Please pray for our missionaries who serve in the Post-Christian Window, one of the greatest mission challenges our church faces today. To learn more, visit GMsda.org/refocus.